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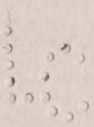
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A Sovereign Remedy

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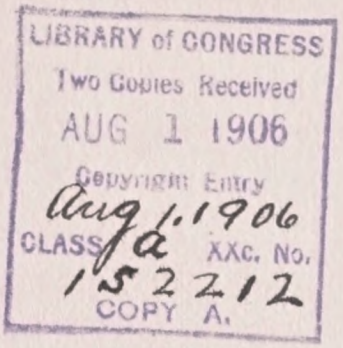
FLORA ANNIE STEEL



New York: 1906

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A SOVEREIGN REMEDY

CHAPTER I

"OH! Dash it all! . . . I'm so sorry . . .!"

"Oh! Dash it all! . . . I'm so sorry . . .!"

The coincident exclamations and their sequent apology were separated by a crash, followed by a pause, during which the two cyclists who had collided picked themselves out of the dust unhurt and looked quickly at their machines; finally turning to each other with a smiling *bienveillance* born of relief—for there was no denying that the affair might have been serious, and they were both conscious of sin.

"It was my fault; I was looking at the view," said one of the two young men candidly. He was a trifle the taller, the broader, and distinctly the better looking; but they were both excellent specimens of clean, wholesome-looking British manhood; curiously alike also, not only in feature, but in resolute adherence to the conventional type.

"But so was I!" returned the other. His voice was the pleasanter, not perhaps so resonant, but with more modulation in it. "Besides, your machine is damaged, and mine isn't—Oh! by George! I hadn't noticed the pedal," he added, following the other's look. He bent for closer inspection, then gave a laugh which was but half rueful; in truth, he was not altogether dissatisfied with this justice of Providence.

"About equal—so we'll cry quits," he said.

"It means walking for us both," said the other with a shrug. "Are you going my way?"

He nodded towards the blue depths of the valley,

which, from this gap in the wavy outline of rolling hill where they stood, dipped down to the distant sea that lay half-way up the sky like a level pale-blue cloud.

The gap was the summit level between east and west; as such, a meeting-place for much water, and many roads.

One of the latter meandered backwards over the wide stretch of pink bell-heather and tasselled cotton grass which told of a catchment bog, where, even in fine weather, the mountain mists dissolved into dew, and the dew gathered itself into dark peaty pools like brown eyes among the tufted lashes of the bents and rushes.

And on either side of this central track two others curved down the rolling moor, north and south, to turn sharply behind a patch of gorse and boulders to join hands, all three, for the steep descent before them, as if afraid of solitude in this new venture. Whence, indeed, had come the collision between the two cyclists, each intent on a suddenly disclosed view.

"There is no other way—except back on our traces—back to Blackborough—Good Lord!" came the reply.

The first speaker smiled. "So you are a Blackberry also—Well! it is an awful place—one can hardly credit up here that all the soot and dirt is only—say a hundred miles off. Here one can breathe——"

He looked as if he could do more than that, as, finally shaking himself free of the last speck of dust, he prepared to start.

"Left nothing behind, I hope," said the other, glancing back. "Hullo! There's a letter tumbled out of somebody's pocket in the stramash—yours or mine?"

It lay address upwards between them, and the taller of the two with a brief "Mine," picked it up and put it in his pocket. His companion stared at him.

"Look here," he said, holding out his hand. "You've made a mistake—that letter belongs to me—I'm Edward Cruttenden."

It was the other's turn to stare. "The deuce you are! Why!—my name is Edward Cruttenden!"

They stood thus staring at each other with a sudden

dim sense of their own similarity, until the shorter of the two shook his head whimsically.

"This is confusing," he remarked in a tone of argument. "Let's sit down and have a pipe over it—we shall have to differentiate ourselves before we start out into the world together."

Almost at their feet a tiny trickle of water, scarcely heard in its soft bed of sphagnum moss, told that already the descent had begun; but this was stayed a few feet further by a rocky hollow in which the stream gathered and brimmed, so that as you looked out over the shallowing pool, the rushes which fringed it stood out against the far distant blue of the sea beyond, and there seemed no reason why the little lakelet should not take one wild leap into the ocean, and so save itself many miles of weary journeying through unseen valleys.

On the brink of this pool, their backs against a convenient boulder, their legs on the short sweet turf that was kept like a lawn by the hungry nip of mountain sheep, the two Edward Cruttendens rested, smoked, and compared notes; somewhat dilatorily, since the afternoon was fine and the effect of a sinking sun on moor and fell absolutely soul-satisfying.

"Let's differentiate our names somehow," said the pleasant-voiced one lazily—"Did your godfathers, etc., do anything more for you than Edward—mine didn't."

The other shook his head. Something in his handsome face had already differentiated itself from the amused curiosity on his companion's.

"That's awkward—we shall be driven to abbreviations. You shall be Ted, and I Ned—both dentals but philologically uninterchangeable; so they'll do for the present. Well, Ted, since you are twenty-seven and I'm gone twenty-nine, and my father died before I was born, we can't be complicated up as long-lost brothers—can we?"

Ted turned to him frowning sharply—"No! but—but what put that into your head. I——"

Ned laughed; a laugh as musical as his voice, but with

a quaint aloofness about it as if he himself were standing aside to listen.

"The position is—romantic; and novels have it so always. As if it were not frankly impossible in this England of ours to dissociate one man from another by breed—we're hopeless mongrels, kin to each other all round. Birth counts for nothing; so let's quit it—Upbringing? "

Ted interrupted shortly—"I—I never knew my father, and my mother died when I was born."

"So did mine," said Ned softly.

There was a pause in which the luring wail of a circling plover who deemed the intruders too near her nest, became insistent, and seemed to fill the mountain solitude with a sense of motherhood, until, once more, the musical, critical laugh struck in on it.

"'Come!' as Shakespeare says, 'there's sympathy for you!' So far we start fair. Education?—I was at Eton, and——"

"I was a Blue-Coat boy," interrupted Ted again, and something in his tone made Ned look the other way, and idly busy himself in trying to dissociate a tender trail of ivy-leaved mountain campanula from its coarser companions in the turf.

"A better education, I expect," he said at last, "though I admit the yellow stockings must be devilish; still "—he paused, settled himself yet more comfortably in his cleft, and with clasped hands behind his head, relapsed into smoke and silence. Even the plover, convinced of their innocence, had ceased her wheeling, luring wail.

So desultorily, sometimes in thought only, sometimes by question and answer, they sat trying to dissociate themselves from the tie of a common name. And before them the afternoon sun, slowly sinking towards extinction in the sea, began to send level rays of light to fill up the valley with a golden haze in which all things lost their individuality.

Finally Ned sat up, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"About equal, I should say; except, of course, for money."

"That means we are unequal in all things," remarked Ted shortly. "You can't deny it. A clerk as I am, out for a Whitsun holiday with ten pounds to spend on it in his pocket, isn't—isn't in the same week with—well! what shall I say——"

"A man who employs clerks," suggested Ned with a smile.

Ted gave an impatient shrug. "As you will. However you come by it, you admit having a hundred pounds."

"A hundred and ten I should say," interrupted Ned, who was counting a handful of loose gold and silver. "I've a hundred in notes besides. However! That needn't be a difficulty!"

The level, golden sun-rays flashed on a curved gold flight, as a bright new sovereign flitted duck-and-drake fashion over the brimming pool at their feet, then disappeared, leaving a circled series of ripples like a smoke wreath on its shiny surface.

"Hold hard! I say—you know—here! stop that, will you—don't be such a blamed fool!" . . .

There was imminent danger of a struggle in reality when a voice from the road behind them said with a mixture of appeal and authority:

"Do not quarrel, see you, my good fellows, but tell me the cause of your disagreement, and I will advise to the best of my ability."

The speaker, also a young man of some thirty years, was tall and dark with a jaw which should have been strong from its length, but was curiously marred by the almost feminine softness of contour which belied the blue shadow of a hard-shaven beard. For the rest he had a fine pair of fiery dark eyes, set close to the thick eyebrows which almost met on his high, narrow forehead. It was the face of a saint or a sinner, preferably the former; but whichever way, the face of an enthusiast.

"You're a parson," said Ned, ceasing from horseplay

and eyeing the rusty black suit. "So we will refer to you, sir, since you are bound by your cloth to agree with *me,* and say that money is the root of all evil."

Apprised of the cause of dispute, the Reverend Morris Pugh, of the Calvinistic Methodist Church in the valley below, sat and looked doubtfully first at the loose gold and silver, then at Ned Cruttenden's critical blue eyes. Both appealed to him strongly; the poetry of his race leapt up to meet the one, the inordinate valuation of even a penny, also typical of his race, reached out to the other.

"Don't say it might be sold and given to the poor," said Ned with a sudden smile—"To begin with, the remark has been appropriated by Judas, and then, it's such a rank begging of the question! Poor or rich, the point at issue between us—my friend over there being a bit of a socialist is, of course, a bit of a mammon worshipper also—is whether gold is—is a sovereign remedy! I say not. It doesn't touch the personal equation, which is all we have—if we have that! So I contend that neither I, nor the world at large, would suffer if I made ducks and drakes like this . . ."

Another curving flight of gold ended in a swift *whit-whitter* of lessening leaps and a final disappearance; but this time the detaining hand was Morris Pugh's. His eager face held no doubt as to his desire, though his mind evidently hesitated over a reason for it.

"You really, sir, ought not," he began; then paused.

"Why?" asked Ned quietly.

Ted answered. "Because it isn't really yours. You never earned it, I'll bet, and the wealth of the world is labour——"

Ned emptied his handful on the turf and interrupted him.

"I give them up! There they are, your sovereign remedies! What are you going to do with them? Why! spend them to please yourselves, of course, as I was doing, as every one does! So I repeat, it wouldn't matter a hang to the world or any of us three here present if I were to make——"

A third sovereign would have followed the other two, but for the arresting power of a new voice.

"Perhaps not; but it would be a most distinct injury to one Peter Ramsay, M.D. So just hand it over, will ye?"

Close behind them stood a sturdy, thick-set man, with bright red-brown eyes and bright bronze-red hair.

He had evidently come down one of the steep mountain sheep-tracks, leading his pony, for it stood beside him now, its hoofs half hidden in the moss, while it stretched its inquiring muzzle towards the glittering pile of sovereigns, as if suspicioning them as a new kind of corn.

"Welcome, sir, so far as I am concerned," replied Ned calmly. "But it isn't in any lack of claimants that our difficulty lies. We have in fact too many! Our reverend friend wants the shekels, why he would be puzzled to say, since he preaches that they have no purchasing power for the one thing needful. My namesake over there wouldn't be averse to them, though he holds the possession of gold to be a crime——"

"I never said so," broke in Ted hotly.

"Excuse me! It follows inevitably from your premise of equality. That gives the *coup de grace* to lawful personal possession of anything; since 'to possess,' means the having and holding of something extraneous to the personality, whereas if every personality has an equal amount of any one thing, that thing ceases to be a possession and becomes part of the personality!—which, of course, is mere hair-splitting! As for you, doctor, you also are illogical. Health and life are the goods you desire, yet money is no remedy for disease and death. Practically, I am the only one with a leg to stand upon. I am a pleasure seeker, pure and simple, so, as this gives me pleasure—here goes!"

The third curved flight of gold finished his remarks so pointedly that silence fell upon all four, as they looked out on the golden light haze, which, finding a mist-wreath in its path, had driven it, all transmuted into gold, to blot out both land and sea, leaving nothing visible save that

foreground of rippled brimming pool, set in its fringe of rushes. The peewit, fearful once more lest the new comers should have keener eyes, wheeled and wailed; the pony, dissatisfied with the sovereigns, nosed and nibbled reflectively at the coarse grass and the delicate campanula.

"I'll tell you what," cried Ned suddenly, his face showing a half scornful amusement. "Let Fate decide which of us needs money most!" He took out a pocket-book as he spoke, and withdrew from it a sheaf of bank notes. "There's a hundred here, and I don't want it—that"—he pointed to the cash—"will carry me through for a week, so my namesake and I could start fair together for a holiday—if he chooses. I'll leave this, therefore, on desposit! There is a convenient cleft in the rock over there, and my tobacco-pouch will keep out the damp——"

He produced the latter also, and began leisurely to exchange contents, while the others gasped——

"But, sir, you can never mean," began the Reverend Morris Pugh, finding his voice first—"To leave money here, so close to the road!—think of the temptation!——"

"To us, certainly," interrupted Ned dryly, "but to no one else. It is ours to take when we think the world—that is, of course, ourselves—wants it—but mind you—we are to say nothing about the taking to any one else in the world. Of course, we agree to treat it as—let us say, a sovereign remedy; therefore we're to use it only to—to cure what we can't cure without it."

"Or think we can't cure," amended Peter Ramsay with twinkling eyes, "my prescriptions are personal matters between me and my conscience. The idea is fetching, an unappropriated balance——"

"Hardly unappropriated," remarked Ned caustically, "it is apparently hypothecated—as you Scotch call it, doctor—to philanthropy, for I suppose charity mustn't begin at home."

"Why not?" put in Ned. "There's really no limitation of object or time. Any of us may withdraw the deposit to-morrow without notice to any one, if he pos-

sess a solid conviction that—that he can't do without it? Do you all agree? ''

There was a pause.

'' It's d—d rot,'' said Ted Cruttenden at last sulkily, '' but on those conditions I agree.''

The Reverend Morris Pugh looked abstractedly over the golden haze in which the whole world was hidden.

'' Money is the root of all evil,'' he began.

'' Bosh! '' interrupted Dr. Ramsay, springing to his feet. '' I'm game! I shall take that money, if some of you aren't too previous, for the first real necessity——''

Ned Cruttenden sprang to his feet also, and laughed. '' So will I, if I can only make up my mind as to what constitutes a ' real necessity.' ''

The two stood challenging each other, then the red-brown eyes under the shaggy bronze-red eyebrows softened.

'' Not much, I'll allow; very often bare life.''

Ned stooped to secrete the tobacco-pouch murmuring, '' *Il faut vivre! Pour moi je n'en vois pas la necessité!* ''

Then he looked up. '' There it is, gentlemen, very much at your disposal. And now, namesake, we can start fair—for our walk to the first blacksmith's shop anyhow.''

Five minutes afterwards the golden haze had usurped even the still unrippled pool and the cleft in the rock, while the four young men on the downward path were lost to view utterly.

CHAPTER II

OWEN JONES, who in his leathern apron might have been a *moyen age* smith, looked up and said something lengthy in Welsh, whereupon the eager, alert little crowd, which had gathered round on the chance of a new emotion, echoed something else in Welsh, smiled, nodded, and looked sage.

"Well," said Ted impatiently.

The smith having no English, the office of translator was taken up by Morris Pugh, who, with a certain appropriative courtesy, had shown them all the beauties of the way with pardonable pride, informed them effusively and charmingly of his past life, his present opinions, told them of his widowed mother with tears in his eyes, of his clever young brother whose ambition was Parliament with a thrill of pride in his voice, and had finally introduced them formally to the smith as an elder of his chapel.

"In about half-an-hour they will be ready, he says; and, see you, Owen Jones is an excellent workman, indeed." Here he raised his voice and looked round for approval. "None better, I am sure."

"No! Indeed," assented Isaac Edwards, who, another elder, had come from his merchant's shop over the way to help on the general interest, "there will be none better than Owen Jones from Pembroke to Pwlhelli!"

The largeness of this proposition suited the hearers. It reflected credit on themselves, their clan, their country; so the quarrymen off duty from their piles of slaty shale among the oak woods, and the boys off school this Saturday afternoon, smiled and saluted *quasi*-military fashion as the two Cruttendens moved off to seek tea in the little inn, where a Cycle Club sign was nearly hidden in a

massive cotoneaster—all red berries and white blossoms—which covered the walls from roadway to gable.

Here they bid good-bye to the Reverend Morris Pugh's good offices. He was due ere long in chapel for choir practice and prayer meeting. As he said so, the unction came into his voice which was noticeable whenever he touched on his profession. It was as if some necessity for shibboleth arose in him, as if some claim—not altogether natural—had to be considered. Indeed, he had lingered a moment to say that prayer was needful everywhere—even in the peaceful hamlet of Dinas—prayer for some outpouring of the Spirit this Whitsuntide week. There had been no special manifestation at present, but one might come any moment—the Lord's mercy being nigh to all them that feared Him; let them remember that. So, having said his word in season, he changed his manner, wished them good luck heartily, and thus left them to their own company; for the Scotch doctor, who had also proved a pleasant acquaintance, had branched off at the bridge, some half a mile up the hill from the little hollow in which Dinas hid itself modestly among the trees. But you could see where the bridge lay, because of the startling red-and-white school beside it, which looked as if it had sprung, like Diana from Jove's brain, fully armed for education out of the bare hillside.

Ted, looking through the inn window as they waited for tea, saw it, and the problem as to why it had been built so far away from the village, a problem which Morris Pugh had evaded, recurred to him.

"I should say, because the site—belonged to some one," said Ned coolly. "These things will happen—even to Boards. They are part of our commercial standard—*caveat emptor*! And in this case, the purchaser being the public—well, we don't think of the public as our neighbour. No! the public is an ill dog in temperance Wales!—especially amongst the Calvinistic Methodists. The parson, though, is a good sort—he didn't fancy the subject!"

"Not as he fancied the Welsh motto over the door,"

laughed Ted. "By George! how he let out about foreign languages and Wales being a conquered country. I had to drop reason and the Norman invasion, or there'd have been a row. He was awfully like Ffluellen—what a genius Shakespeare was."

"Yes! He understood, and you don't. I tell you, Wales is the most Rip-van-winkleish place in the world. You can go to sleep in a fifteenth-century farm and wake up the day after to-morrow in an Intermediate School. I've been in India, and it reminds me awfully of the National Congress. But I like it, though it is fatiguing to any one with a hankering after fact. Still, if there was a little more water—there is none in summer time, you know—and a little less rain, a little more right, and a trifle less righteousness it would do very well."

"Righteousness!" echoed Ted, "there's enough of that, anyhow. Two, four, six, eight, eight belfries to how many souls in the village?—four hundred all told?"

"That's only four chapels; the others are Sunday schools, I'll bet—'the Macleods must have a boat o' their ain.' Then there's the church—that ruin up yonder—it'll have a school too——"

But Ted's attention was diverted. "I say," he remarked, "that's a ripping girl!"

She had come out of a cottage a little way from the inn to intercept Morris Pugh and was engaging him in a lively conversation, despite his hurry. She was tall, dressed in black that glinted, and the fact that her hair was in curling pins did not interfere with her very *voyante* good looks.

"H'm!" remarked Ned, coming over to see, "reminds me of last Monday—I mean Bank Holiday! Doesn't she?"

The sarcasm was just, but it brought a faintly-annoyed flush to his companion's face. He knew himself to be a lower bred man, and the other Edward Cruttenden had a trick of reminding him of this and of certain other facts which, given fair choice, he would probably have forgotten.

So the village was left to its own devices till tea was over, when he took his pipe to the window again.

"Barring the prices, which whip an International Exhibition," he remarked, "this would be a jolly headquarters spot. That big hill—'Eye of the World,' the parson called it, didn't he?—is ripping!"

This time the word lost its inherent triviality before the dignity of those receding curves of sunshine shown by shadow, which swept up to the light-smitten crest of the great mountain.

"Personally," remarked Ned drily, "I find the view of the smithy more—Now, don't!—It isn't the least good fussing—it's the village tea-time, and not all the king's horses——"

But Ted and his bad words were off hammering at the closed doors, and finally running the smith to earth, having tea comfortably on an oak dresser hung with lustre jugs. It was a very small, but highly decorated cottage, this of the smith, showing uneducated artistic cravings in many things, in a harmonium, endless cheap photograph frames, china enormities, a few glazed certificates in Welsh to one "Myfanwy Jones," and here and there a priceless bit of Staffordshire ware.

Then ensued a deadlock. For the smith, scenting coercion, flared up instantly in Welsh, and Ted, conscious of breach of contract, grew abusive in English, till suddenly from above, came a full, high voice. "I will come down when I have finished dressing. Pray, sir, accommodate yourself with a cup of tea."

Then followed shrill Welsh exordiums to the smith, which resulted in a cheerful smile as he reached down another cup.

Ted took it, also a piece of bread and butter, feeling he could do nothing else, and as he sat waiting, the feminine voice continued upstairs a conversation which apparently had been going on when he had burst into the cottage, though he had been too ill-used to notice it.

"If you do not want the hat, Alicia Edwards, you can oblige by replacing in the box; but you will be dowdy

beside the other girls at choir holiday, and Mervyn will not look at you twice. No, indeed! And it is but one-and-twenty shillings. Dirt cheap! Be wise and buy. See, you shall have it for a pound, and you can pay when you marry Mervyn."

"Mary!" choked a softer, more emotional voice. "Ah! I only want him to look at me. Ah, Myfanwy! Do you think he could——"

"If you do not care for the height in front you can wear it hindside before. It is even just so fashionable," went on the first voice, regardless of sentiment. "Put it on, child, and don't be so foolish. What is a pound, and you a pupil teacher? There! You look beautiful. Now, give me my hat pins, I must go to that man downstairs."

A *frou-frou* of silk petticoats on the ladder stairs which led up from a corner of the living room made Ted look round.

He saw, first, a pair of many-strapped, beaded black shoes with superlatively high heels, next, an interval of trim, black openwork stockings, finally, in a *tourbillon* of laced silk flouncings, over which it let down a trailing black satin dress, a vision, in which Ted at once recognised the girl in curling pins; or rather her apotheosis, for she was now glorious both within and without.

Her beautiful figure was literally cased in a tight bodice, which looked as if she must have been melted and run into it ere it could be so guiltless of wrinkles. The heavy lace yoke with which it was made showed the whiteness of her skin beneath it; a whiteness which held its own against the double row of false pearls about her neck. For the rest she was planned, laid out, developed in exact accordance with a Paris model in a shop.

In one hand she held a most irresponsible creation, which Ted almost diagnosed as a hat, though it had neither crown nor brim, and in the other, a perfect sheaf of long, black-headed pins.

She smiled at him with frank favour and, saying carelessly, "The smith, my father, will attend to you, sir,

when he has had tea,'' passed on to a little mirror on the wall, placed the irresponsible creation on her tumultuous yet disciplined waves of hair in the very last position of which any sane creature would have dreamt, and proceeded, apparently, to stick the long pins through her head.

Seeing, however, in the glass Ted's face of angry consternation, she flashed round on him tartly yet condescendingly.

'' It is no use trying to hurry Dinas. They are country people, not like London or Blackborough. This is not Williams and Edwards, or such like place, I can tell you.''

The name of the biggest drapery firm in Blackborough gave Ted a clue to some of his perplexity.

'' I see,'' he said slowly, '' that's how you come to be—you are in the shop, of course, aren't you? ''

She was by this time dexterously rolling back her veil preparatory to tieing it behind, her chin held down to keep it in position. So her dark eyes had full play as she retorted that she was. Second, in fact, in the mantle department—because of her figure. She displayed it lavishly in manipulating her veil, smiling the while at her own consciousness of perfection.

Ted smiled also. The big, bold, beautiful animal was distinctly fetching. He said something to that effect which made her giggle.

'' You should pass your time coming to choir practice,'' she said, challenging him again quite frankly, when, after much shrill Welsh with her father, the latter stuck to two hours as his shortest limit for repair. '' I sing in chapel when I am on holiday still; my music-master was the great Taleisin—that is his bard's name, of course—and Alicia Edwards, here, has won so many times in competition.''

The last sentence introduced a girl who had just come downstairs, with a display of white lace stockings and thereinafter a blue dress surmounted by an extremely smart hat, possibly the one over the purchase of which

Myfanwy Jones had spent her eloquence. The girl was fair and pretty, but there was about her that marked lack of personal grip on her surroundings, which is so noticeably a result of eleven years and more of strict Board School life; for Alicia's father had marked her out as a pupil teacher when she joined the infant class at three. That had been her ambition till she secured the position at sixteen. Now, at seventeen? At seventeen she blushed and giggled when Myfanwy went on:

"She will sing with Mervyn Pugh, our minister's brother. He is a very good looking young man— just so good looking as you."

To which obvious challenge Ted said something which changed the giggle to a titter; after which he left them, feeling a trifle uncertain as to the result of a reference to Ned.

He found him lying flat on his stomach on the bridge which spanned the stream again a little further down the village, watching, so he said, for even a shadow of a trout in the deep pool below it, a pool which after the long spring drought was only connected to the next one by a mere driblet of water.

" Do? " echoed Ned, looking up at Ted with a twinkle in his eyes. " Excelsior, of course." He waved his pipe towards the " World's Eye," still shrugging high shoulders in the sunshine, and away from Miss Myfanwy Jones, who was standing with Alicia Edwards at the gate of her father's neglected cabbage-patch, buttoning her grey suede gloves with a hook from her silver chatelaine. Her face showed beautiful unconsciousness, though her eyes were on the alert.

Ted hesitated; then from a larger cottage emerged the Reverend Morris Pugh, very spick and span, accompanied by a younger man, evidently by his looks the handsome Mervyn. But the forehead fringe which, after the fashion of young Wales, he wore, was too much for Ted. It looked exactly as if it, also, had been in a curling pin, and feeling vaguely that he would rather not be seen by Ned in its company, he laughed, said " Excelsior, by all

means,'' and led the way, taking off his hat to the charmer as he passed.

Five minutes afterwards, pausing for breath, their first spurt upwards done, the village lay behind them, looking solitary in its close cohesion of cottages and trees.

But from the church, all ivy-mantled amid its wide graveyard, a bell was clanging, and across the grassy mounds dotted with stones, a tall figure in a black cassock and a biretta cap made its way to the vestry door.

'' The voice of one crying in the wilderness,'' remarked Ned, '' but he has the bell ringer for congregation, and even Miss Myfanwy Jones will come back to the old churchyard in the end, as her fathers have done, for a penny funeral.'' Then he laughed. '' I shall never forget my Scotch groom——'' he paused. Ted eyed him curiously.

'' Well? '' he said.

'' Oh, nothing! only his criticism on a Welsh funeral was scathing. ' There was no a drop o' whisky, an' they asket me tae pit inter the brod! ' Insult on injury! ''

So, laughing, they made their way upwards, through black land and bog, through thickets of unimaginably tall brake, and over sparse close-bitten knolls, the sheep flying in disorder from them like a routed army, a stonechat starting from the gorse giving them a momentary thought of game—a thought, no more. And the sunshine mounted with them, chased by the shadow, so that it came upon them by surprise when they reached the summit to see the valley below them veiled in soft purple, and the sun itself not far from setting behind an ominous low level of cloud which lay far out to seaward.

'' It has taken longer than I thought,'' said Ned, stretching himself flat on his stomach, '' but there is plenty of time.''

'' Plenty,'' echoed Ted, cross-legged like a Turk as he knocked out the ashes of his pipe on a stone.

'' We've done the ginger-beer woman, anyhow,'' remarked Ned after a pause. '' She comes there,'' he

pointed to a hovel of stones a few hundred yards further along the plateau, "from the Llangolley side; seven A.M. till seven P.M. during tourist time, the innkeeper said. I wonder how she spends her day?" Then, half to himself, he added, "As if this wasn't meat and drink enough for any one."

It should have been. Far and near, cleft by the purpling shadow from below, the higher hill-tops dissociated themselves from the lower ones, shining rosy, resplendent, giving back the sun its parting gift royally, yet yielding bit by bit to the swift storming uprush of shadow. Another, and another picket of light stood, broke, fled from the foe to some higher refuge, until the last steadfast post of the "World's Eye" remained alone above a world of shadow. Remained alone, a vantage-ground of clear vision, above the wide cup of amethyst hills in which the flood-tide of the sea lay prisoned. So still, so serene, so silvery, lulled to unresisting sleep, as a captive bride might be, by love for the surpassing beauty of those embracing arms. Beyond, over the broad belt of darkening ocean, the sun was just dipping into the bar of cloud, leaving a flame upon the sky.

"We must wait and see the last of it," said he upon the grass suddenly, and the other nodded.

Up and up breathlessly crept the light. On the patch of bracken in the hollow, rallying round a spur of rock, flying for a fresh stand across a shaly slope, so holding its own for an instant against a scarp, driven over the ledge! Ned's hand went out to touch it, but found it behind him; so, turning swiftly he saw the last flicker of sunlight resting, ere final flight, on a yellow placard—

"Ginger beer, 6d."

He started to his feet. "Damn it all!" he cried, "fancy finding that ultimate sixpence here!"

"Sixpence?" queried Ted, rousing himself from a day dream. "Ah! I was thinking of the hundred pounds you left over yonder. It really is d——d rot, you know. What's to hinder my claiming it—well—say to-morrow morning?"

"You've time now if you wish it," assented Ned, "and if the thunderstorm——"

As he spoke there came a quiver of light far out over the hidden sea. It seemed to come from below the threshold of the visible world, like the sudden gleams from the beyond, which, at times, irradiate the mind of man with some infinite message.

Ted turned round startled at the greyness that was fast settling down on hill and sky. "We had better get down as sharp as we can," he cried hastily, taking his bearings. "I think if we try to the left a little we shall get down the rocky part before dusk makes going difficult."

Once again, however, the short cut proved the longer way. The path grew more and more hopeless, until after scrambling down an almost precipitous corrie they found themselves brought up on a jutting spur, by a thirty feet drop as the only onward way.

"It's—it's——" muttered Ted, as he satisfied himself they must go back.

"Worth it," remarked Ned; for the jag of rock on which he stood overhung a wilderness of grey shadow and grey water; the grey hills watching the grey water recede from the shores, leaving behind it still greyer patches of sand that rose roundly from the level reaches of the ebbing tide.

He stood, long after Ted had started upward, watching also, and thinking how like these billowy sand-banks were to a drowned woman's clothes. Some goddess of the earth, surely, lay dead there, her body compassed by the hills.

"I say! Aren't you coming?" came his companion's shout. "We haven't time to lose. Look there!"

A vivid flash of lightning shot beyond the deep bank into the rolling clouds that were coming up swiftly with the rising wind; and, more quickly than one would have expected, a low mutter of thunder caught the crags in monotonous echoes.

"Go on! I'll soon catch you up," shouted Ned in

return. And he did so; for there was a lightness, a certain stress of action about his every movement which differentiated him from his companion's more deliberate steadiness.

The wind rose at every gust, and in the fast growing dusk, the sheep sought shelter behind rocks and boulders for the night.

Yet still the downward path could not be found.

"We had best follow the stream yonder," said Ned at last. "It will be longer, but it will take us down eventually, and I don't want to camp out with my pipe in that storm."

The first drop or two of rain emphasised his advice; but it was no easy task to follow it with the mist closing in on all sides. Then darkness came, bringing a perfect deluge with it. They could scarcely see the stones at their feet, except when, with the sudden summer lightning, the whole world of hill and dale and sea was revealed to them for a second, then shut out again as if in obedience to the immediate roll-call of the thunder.

But they were young, and it was soft, warm rain; so, with many a slip and tumble, and many a laugh, they made way somehow, pausing at length to leeward of a large rock to light a fresh pipe and look at the time.

"Half past ten!" exclaimed Ted, "who'd have thought it!" He spoke joyously, for his pulses were bounding with the vitality due to the exercise of mind and body.

"I should," replied Ned; "I'm beastly hungry. However"—here a brilliant flash gave them the world again, "I believe that's the bottom down there."

The vision of a stream in flood surging through a low-lying wooded valley not far beneath them, was certainly the bottom, but it was nearer twelve o'clock than eleven ere they found level footfall, and that only on the brink of the stream.

To cross, or not to cross became the question. They referred it to the next flash of lightning; a long wait in

the darkness, for the storm was passing, the rain had ceased.

When it came, it showed them an oasis of field, a clump of trees, and something amongst them which might or might not be a human habitation. The point was settled, however, the next moment by the sudden twinkle of a wandering light quite close on the other side. It stopped dead at their view halloo, then retreated, evidently at a run, to reappear, nevertheless, almost immediately in company with a remonstrant voice, clear, pleasant, decided.

"Boggles!" it said. "There ain't no sech things as boggles! I've told 'ee so a dozen times, Adam, and I won't 'ave it said. So there!"

"Why, Martha, woman, I'm none fur sayin' 'twas boggles, fur sure, it might 'a bin a screech howl, but—Lud 'elp us!—what's that?"

The light was evidently snatched at and held aloft. Then it came forward a step, and the voice rose in angry scorn.

"Get yer gone, you lazy, good-for-nothin' Welsh libe'tynes. I tell you she's gone, and right glad was I to get quit o' her. An impident lass, that friv'lous, her 'ead wouldn't 'old nothing but you young sparks."

"I beg your pardon," called Ned, interrupting the flow of wrath, "but we have lost our way, and being drenched through, want to know——"

"Well, I never!" came the voice, its owner grasping the situation at once. "Here, Adam, man, take the light an' show the gentle folk across the ford, an' I'll just run back and see to things."

Five minutes later, escorted by an apple-cheeked man of about fifty, they were entering a cottage where the fire had evidently been newly brushed up, a kettle put on, and a few hurried touches added to already existing tidiness by an apple-faced woman forty or thereabouts.

She bobbed them a truly primeval curtsey.

"Dear sakes, gentlemen, you must be through to your vests. Adam, set a cheer for the gentle folks, man.

Adam and me was just after the hi'fer, sir, she's down calvin', an' they lays like lead on me till it's over, that they do. An' Adam is such a heavy sleeper, but there! Two of a sort can't live together, no, they can't."

This calm, philosophic treatment of him, brought a half-conscious giggle from Adam, and she passed on to treat of other subjects in like manner. "The village, h'm, not much of a place for *sleepin'* in, an' a good mile anyhow, with the bridge locked. Better a hayloft *to yourself* than some of them cottages. As for supper, they wouldn't get nothin' fit for gentle folk to eat. She could see what she'd got, an' meanwhile Adam'd show them the loft, and bring 'em over pillows an' blankets; they'd dry easy in the hay, while the clothes hung 'andy on the rafters, or Adam could bring 'em back to the fire when he tuk over supper, not but what it *was* perhaps better to 'ave somethin' to put on in case o' fire!"

A quarter of an hour afterwards, having made a most excellent meal of cold beefsteak pie and tea, which, they were assured, was "better to keep a chill off than beer," they duly put out the lantern, with which they had been bidden "to be real careful because of the yay," and listened to the clear, dispassionate voice saying, as its owner passed the loft—

"You go ter yer bed, Adam, an' sleep while you can. She's passed midnight, and it wunt come now till dawn; but I ain't the mind to sleep. They lies too heavy, poor dears."

"That woman," said Ned, from his blanketed bed in the hay, "ought to have been a Field Marshal or a Prime Minister."

There was absolute conviction in his voice.

CHAPTER III

THEY found the summer sun had been at work for some hours on the storm-drenched world ere they woke to the lowing roar of the heifer from the neighbouring cow-house. Motherhood had evidently come to her at dawn, bringing its wider outlook, its larger self; and sure enough, when they scrambled down from the loft, they found at the foot of the ladder, penned in by an old door, a big, black bull-calf lustily answering anxiety by assertion.

The cottage over against them, however,—it formed part of a long range of farm-steadings, which stretched right away to the stream they had crossed the night before—showed no sign of life. The door was closed, the window-blinds down; the inmates were most likely sleeping sound after their broken rest.

So, their clothes being still damp, the two young men went up stream to a long, deep pool, and spreading them out to dry in the hot sunshine, had a morning bath, thereinafter drying themselves in the same fashion on a grassy bank, whence, looking up the valley, they could see the mountains closing in on the narrow strip of level pasture. Behind them, the downward view was absolutely shut out by the farm-buildings, above which showed a yew tree, and by a dense clump of rhododendrons, which trended away until it met the other wooded hillside of the little glen.

"I believe we are really on an island," remarked Ted, critically appraising the values of some willows and elders which, higher up beyond the pasture fields, seemed to betoken another channel of water.

"A desert island," said Ned, busy over the intricacies

of cold water and a razor from his shoulder-wallet. "We are reduced to the makeshifts of primitive manhood. What more do we want?—and all without that hundred pounds! I never slept better than I did in that hay."

"Small blame to you with feather pillows and best Whitney blankets! And as for money—we shall have to tip these people. I suppose half-a-crown will do——"

"Ahem," replied Ned somewhat doubtfully; "but it was beastly late, you know."

"Very; but that wasn't our doing: they were up with the 'hi'fer.' However, let's put it at three shillings."

"But, my dear fellow, consider the beefsteak pie—it was simply the best pie——"

"Charge it to appetite," said Ted, rising ready dressed, supple, clean, and strong. "Three shillings is ample. Come along if you're ready, and let us get off. I'm keen to start."

He looked it; but the starting was not so easy, for though on trial the door of the cottage was found to be on the latch only, no one could be made to hear.

"Let's leave the tip on the table," suggested Ted impatiently.

"My dear fellow," replied Ned, "I won't go without seeing the 'General,' and thanking her for that excellent pie. Besides—think how she simply scooped us up last night like half-drowned kittens and set us going again! I tell you, sir, that if—it being Saturday night—she had suggested washing my head, I'd have submitted meekly, as I used with old nurse. Why! I dreamt about frilled drawers all last night!"

Ted was irresponsive; a word had arrested his attention. "Saturday!" he echoed thoughtfully, "then to-day is Sunday!"

"First Sunday after Whitsun—No! Trinity Sunday, of course, the shortest night in the year and Midsummer Night's Dream all combined. How time flies. . . ."

"What luck!" gloomed Ted. "I shouldn't wonder

if the smith were to refuse us our cycles—they are like that in these wild parts—what beastly bad luck!"

Here Ned, who had been prospecting at the back of the passage, opened a door, suspecting it to be possibly a coal-cellar; but he fell back from the sudden blaze of almost blinding sunlight which poured in from a long, low, absolutely empty room, which stretched away on either side over boards scrubbed to whiteness to a wide oriel window.

At that on the left-hand side stood a parrot-perch, beside which was a tall girl in blue engaged in making a white cockatoo with a yellow crest talk.

"Gimme a sixpence," it muttered hurriedly as the bit of banana turned away with the girl at the interruption.

So for a second or two they stood; the two young men smitten helpless by the extreme beauty of that girlish figure, framed as it was by the great sprays of white June clematis and great trusses of scarlet ivy geranium from the garden beyond the window.

"Gimme a sixpence, gimme a sixpence," reiterated the cockatoo in guttural allurement. Then the girl smiled.

"You must have been very wet last night, I'm afraid," she said in an absolutely perfect voice, true, pure, sweet; the real voice of the siren, which none who hear forget.

The two at the door, who stood bare-headed, almost doubting the evidence of their own eyes, gave an audible sigh of relief. This was no vision then, this beauty of womanhood pure, and simple, with softly smiling eyes.

And yet? They glanced at each other doubtfully, and the three shillings in Ted's palm seemed suddenly to become hot and scorch him. Impossible to offer three shillings to perfection!

"Thank you, yes—I mean no—I mean that we were wet, quite wet—but now thanks to the kindness of your——" Ned paused. Much as he admired "the General," he could not affiliate to her this radiant creature.

Ted, becoming conscious vaguely that here was something new to him, something which held possible danger to his outlook in life, remembered his hurry and came to the point.

"We are very much obliged, and so, if you please, as we are about to start, we should like—I mean if you——"

Here absolute terror lest Ted should really offer those three shillings to the glorious creature in the first flush of a womanhood which seemed to Ned to be worth the whole world, made him step forward, holding out a shining sovereign.

"We've really been most awfully comfortable," he said apologetically, "and if you—if you wouldn't mind giving this——"

"Why!" she exclaimed, all eagerness, snatching at the coin, "I believe it's a sovereign! Fancy that! A whole sovereign!"

Ned felt outraged at her indecent haste; and at the back of Ted's brain lay an instant regret concerning the three shillings; he would then only have been responsible for one and sixpence instead of ten shillings.

Suddenly she held the coin up to the window, laughed—a rippling laugh like running water—and handed it back again. "Thanks for letting me see it; I hadn't seen one before, but, as grandfather says, it blocks the sunlight just like a penny!"

"You—you hadn't seen a sovereign!" said Ned feebly.

She shook her head. "We don't have money in this house. Grandfather doesn't hold with it."

"Not hold with it!" echoed Ted argumentatively. "But you must—you must pay your debts; and we want to pay ours."

Her face grew serious. "Ah! you want to pay something. That's Martha's business. Here! Martha! These gentlemen want to pay you a sovereign."

At an inner door the figure of "the General" appeared with floury arms and her prim bob curtsey.

"Hope the hi'fer didn't disturb of you, gentlemen,"

she said cheerfully; "but really there ain't nothing owin', let alone a sovereign's worth."

"But there must be something; and we tried to find you before, but you were asleep," protested Ned in an aggrieved tone.

"Asleep! Lord save us!" laughed Martha. "Why! Adam bein' that sound after the calvin', I was over to the loft myself three times afore I come in to my stove. But there ain't nothin'. The yay was 'ome grown, and welcome, seeing 'twas but beddin' stuff at best, and none spoilt for use by humans sleepin' on it." A faint chuckle showed her sense of superiority.

"But there was the beefsteak pie," began Ned.

Martha's giggle increased. "'Twouldn't never 'ave kep' sweet over Sunday, sir, so the pigs 'ud 'ave 'ad it if you gentlemen 'adn't."

That was an unanswerable argument.

"Will you please take it back," said the girl imperiously, holding the gold out in the easy clasp of her finger and thumb.

"But there was the tea—and the pillows and the blankets," protested Ted severely.

She turned on him swiftly. "Don't you hear Martha doesn't want it, and I don't want it. So if you don't want it also, we'd better give it to Cockatua, for I'm tired of holding it. Here, Cockatua, is a golden sovereign for you."

The bird's great yellow crest rose with greed as it grabbed at the prize, but fell again at its first hasty bite. The beady black eyes showed distrust; it turned the coin round, and bit at it again; then again. Finally, with a guttural murmur of "Gimme a sixpence," it dropped the sovereign deliberately into its bread and milk tin.

Every one laughed, Martha, however, checking herself with a hasty "Drat them scones; they'll be burnt as black as the back o' the grate," and disappearing whence she came, her voice calling back in warning to Miss Aura, not to forget the master's message.

"Aura?" questioned Ned quickly. "That's not a very appropriate——"

"My name is Aurelia," she said quite frankly, "and the message is that grandfather would like you to breakfast with him. I think you had better," she added still more frankly, "for you mightn't get anything in the village. It's Sunday, you know."

They glanced at each other mechanically, though each had decided to accept the invitation. So she led them through the kitchen, where Martha was bustling about over her stove, into a hall. This further house had evidently been joined on to the back of the cottage by the long room in which the cockatoo lived.

"We breakfast in the verandah," said Aurelia, turning to the left into a large low-roofed room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, but containing no other furniture save a chair and a writing-table.

The glimpse afforded by the open hall-door showed them that Ted's surmise had been correct. They were on an island, for to the right of the garden a stream, after dashing over some rocks, disappeared behind the high wall enclosing the orchard which filled up the end of the valley, while, as they passed on through the book room, a lawn lay before them sloping down to a deep, still pool, a pool shadowed by surely the biggest yew-tree they had ever seen. Its great arms spread themselves out, and, bowed to earth by their own weight, found a fresh foothold for another upward spring, until the one tree seemed a grove.

Here in a sunny square formed by the joining of house and steading walls, they found a breakfast-table, and beside it, in an arm-chair, an old man with a thin face and Florentine-cut, silver-white hair.

"Excuse my rising, gentlemen," he said in a high, suave voice, his nervous hands gripping the chair-arms in rather a helpless fashion, "but I am somewhat—more or less—of a cripple at times—I suffer from rheumatism, and last night's rain——"

"Might have made us rheumatic also but for your kindness," began Ned politely.

"Not at all! Not at all—Martha does all that sort of thing well—an excellent creature—really an excellent creature, but alas! quite devoid of intelligence," said their host, and his large, restless, pale blue eyes which, from the smallness of his other features, dominated his face, took on a remonstrant expression that was curiously obstinate yet weak. "Yes!" he continued, "absolutely devoid of brains. One of those hewers of wood and drawers of water by desire and determination who stand so—so infernally—in the way of true socialistic development. But, by the way I am forgetting to introduce myself. I am Sylvanus Smith, President—but stay——! Aurelia, my child, fetch the Syllabus of the Socialistic Congress from my writing-table; that will be the best introduction. And here comes Martha with, I presume, breakfast. We generally have a parlourmaid, but"—the remonstrant expression came to his face again—"Martha is somewhat hard on maids. She—she doesn't believe in perfect freedom of soul and body, so the last left yesterday in—in a flame of fire! The young men of the village——"

Ned laughed. "We know about that, sir; we were taken last night for "lazy good-for-nothin' Welsh libertynes.'"

Mr. Sylvanus Smith appeared shocked. "I really must speak to Martha," he said in an undertone, adding aloud, "Well, Martha, what have you there?"

The question was provoked by the setting down of a silver dish among the fruits, nuts, and other vegetarian diets on the table, and there was a certain tremulous authority in it.

The subservience of Martha's bob was phenomenal.

"Bacin an' eggs, sir, an' there's more ter follow if required."

The authority dissolved into an ill-assured cough.

"As a rule," remarked Mr. Smith helplessly, "we do not allow meat——"

"But lor! sir," put in Martha, beaming, "wasn't it jest a Providence as me and Adam had left that bit o'

beefsteak pie, seeing that strawberries an' sech like are but cold comforts to stummicks as has bin drenched through by storm.''

There could be no reply but acquiescence to this proposition, so the strangers began on the bacon and eggs. Mr. Sylvanus Smith breakfasted off some patent food, and Aurelia ate strawberries and brown bread, and drank milk; they seemed to have got into her complexion and hair—at least so thought Ned.

The clematis wreaths, the great bosses of the scarlet geraniums hung round them, the great yew-tree shot out fingers of shadow claiming the lawn and actually touching one of the jewelled flower-beds, while behind these, tall larkspurs and lychnis, their feet hidden in a wilderness of bright blossom, rose up against the rows of peas and raspberries in the kitchen garden, and the green of young apples in the orchard.

Against this paradise of flower and fruit they saw Aurelia, like any Eve, beautiful, healthful, gracious, smiling; and they lost both their hearts and their heads promptly—for the time being, at any rate.

They looked at her by stealth in the long silences which were perforce the fate of Mr. Sylvanus Smith's guests, for he could talk, and talk as he wrote well, of the future of Socialism, and the happiness of the many, oblivious altogether of the happiness or unhappiness, of the few that was being worked out in his immediate neighbourhood. That did not trouble him in the least.

Whether from happiness or unhappiness, past, present, or to come, the two young men were singularly silent as, after being piloted by Adam through the rhododendrons and across the drawbridge, they left the island paradise behind them.

" That was a beautiful garden,'' said Ted.

" Very,'' remarked Ned.

Then they were silent again; but they thought persistently of Aurelia, of her beauty, her unworldliness, her curious frank dignity, and the shrewd common-sense she had shown in every word she uttered.

The road to the village led through a wood at first; a wood—as such Welsh mountain woods are at Midsummer—all lush with fern and bramble and great drifts of foxglove envious of each other's height, and holding their heads higher upon the narrowing clefts, until some very ordinary spike, gaining a vantage of rock, out-tops the rest, and so lords it over all.

Then, after a while, the wooded slopes closed in to rock. Here the divided streams rejoined each other with a quick babble of recognition, and, as if out of sheer good spirits, gave a gladsome leap or two ere settling down to race hand in hand through a ravine but a few feet below the curving road.

Finally a precipitous bluff blocked the view, but round this at a sharp turn Ted paused.

"Hullo!" he said. "Why, here we are again!"

They were at the bridge by the cross-roads where they had parted with Dr. Ramsay the day before. On the bare hillside stood the school, deserted this Sunday morning; below them lay the village. Over yonder was hidden the hundred pounds of floating deposit—(Ted's eyes sought this out immediately.) Over there, still shrugging that high shoulder of his in the sunshine, was Llwggd-y-Brydd disclaiming—so Ned thought—all responsibility for their last night's adventure. A real Midsummer Eve's dream, indeed! And to-night?—Midsummer night—would the adventure continue?

"It was two o'clock, was it, he said, for dinner?" asked Ted irrelevantly. He knew the hour perfectly, but he wanted to discuss the question.

"Two o'clock if the cycles couldn't be got," corrected Ned gravely.

"Of course," replied Ted impatiently, "and we will go and ask——"

Ned suddenly burst out laughing. "Why the deuce should we ask? You'd rather dine and so would I. That's simplicity itself; besides, we can go to church or chapel and confess the sin of omission meanwhile—if you like."

Ted looked at him with gloomy virtue. "Of course we must ask—at any rate I shall," he replied haughtily. He felt in his way exactly as his companion did, that is, as if every atom of life in him had been stirred to its depths; but conventional morality and solid fact meant more to him than they did to Ned.

The smith, mercifully, was kind. It had been too late to finish repairs on Saturday; they must wait over till Monday.

So, in a blissful state of relief, they sat on the bridge parapet again and watched the country folk come in to chapel.

"The Calvinists take the cake in dress," remarked Ned. "Half the big drapery shops in Blackborough belong to them, I'm told, and they give a percentage to their assistants. So I expect Miss—what's her name?—Jones is responsible for half the hats here. Ye gods! what a superstructure for one soul!" As he spoke he watched a carrotty-haired girl with a brick-red burnt face, who wore, both inside and outside a leghorn hat, a wreath of crushed roses shaded from beetroot to carrots.

"Myfanwy," said Ted lightly, "is equal to the burden. Here she comes with the parson, and Miss Alicia has the beauty-boy Mervyn. How happy could both be with either—I wonder how they grow those curls."

He spoke with lazy scorn; but by and by the sound of part-singing instinct with swing and go roused him, for he had sung in a choir all his life, and, after vainly trying to persuade Ned to accompany him, he went off to listen, leaving the latter stretched out full length on the parapet watching for invisible trout.

After a time, however, the old churchyard in its turn attracted Ned's lazy interest, and he strolled off to examine the tombstones. They stood cheek by jowl, and to judge by the dates on many, must represent a perfect battlefield of dead, if all the parish came thither to rest. Some lettering over a low round arch of a sunk door in the church arrested him. Fourteen hundred and fifty-two! No wonder the place looked ruinous, and that he

had to step down into the porch! Here his eye took in various framed regulations in red and black, signed "Gawain Meredith, Rector." Evidently the Reverend Gawain was high. And was that a smell of incense?

He set aside the curtain, and stood under the organ-loft. Here surprise held him motionless. Everything was so new, so gilded, so flawless. There was a blaze of red and white on the altar, before which a tall figure in red and white attended by two acolytes, knelt reading the ante-communion service. From them, scattered sparsely over regulation oak benches, was a surpliced choir, four boys on either side coming down, as it were, to meet a huge brass lectern and a red embroidered faldstool.

But the congregation? Six or seven may be in dark corners, or rather since some one must play the organ, eight! No! for the celebrant, after giving out a hymn, strode to a harmonium close to the pulpit, and thereinafter, upborne by his strong baritone, a long-drawn sacramental chant wavered in the aisles, and died away in the rafters of the roof.

What then of the organ? Ned turned, crept up the stair without waking an old man—the bell-ringer no doubt—who was asleep in his long-accustomed seat beside the blow-handle, and found himself before the usual red-curtain screen. Seating himself on the organ stool he looked out, unseen, on the church below.

It was quaint. There was the Reverend Gawain in the pulpit giving out his text, "There came a mighty rushing wind," and looking out over his church as if it had been full instead of empty.

There were some, said the preacher, who expected signs and wonders direct from the Almighty, but the great rushing mighty wind was the teaching of the Church which had begun on Whit Sunday and would go on throughout the year. It was a mighty voice, indeed, sounding in the ears of all his parishioners, even those who were absent. And it spoke through him, their priest, responsible to the Church for the soul of every

man, woman, and child, in the parish of Dinas. Seven minutes, by Ned's watch, of unbounded authority, of absolute priesthood, of the Middle Ages. Ned, watching the dignity of the Reverend Gawain Meredith's denial of the passage of Time became admiring. And he was such a fine figure of a man. The old type, chief, medicine man, Druid, Archbishop—Archangel if you will—always the same, in all ages.

Ned wandered off into thoughts such as men of his type have had since the beginning of time, and was roused from them by seeing the priest, holding a huge sacrificial brass platter, awaiting the sheepish sidesman at the chancel steps.

By all that was holy!—one penny—only one, the sidesman's own; but its poverty was covered the next instant by the Rector's sovereign. Well done to the Rector!

What an imagination, what a magnificent make-believe. Something in Ned's innermost soul leapt up to meet this escape from deadly reality. It deserved a recognition. Yes! as the man couldn't play himself out of church, *he* would—the organ was there!

In sudden impulse he laid an awakening hand on the drowsy sexton. "Blow!" he whispered strenuously, "Blow, I tell you, for all you're worth."

The man, half-asleep, obeyed; Ned opened the keyboard, and not knowing his instrument put on full diapason. Thus, when the last Amen had echoed out from the Rector, for the choir appeared to be dummies, and the cope and the brass platter began to follow the little white surplices, the whole procession paused in amazement, as, with many a note dumb, many a dissonance overborne by the full burst of sound, Handel's "Lift up your heads, oh! ye gates," crashed into every corner of the old church. Crashed for the first two bars, then, the pressure on leaky bellows yielding, wavered and sank.

Ned, realising his failure, was down the loft stairs, through the graves, and over the back of the churchyard wall, where he lay convulsed with inextinguishable laughter at his own mad prank, before curiosity followed

the amazement in the church as the last breath of air escaped in a long-drawn pipe from a stuck note in the treble.

It was some time ere, seeing the chapel folk coming out, he made his way round at the back of the Rectory wood and joined Ted, whom he found enthusiastic about the singing, and glad to have heard the Reverend Morris Pugh's "hwl," the bardic note. It was really rather impressive, that constant iteration of the A-flat, and even to one ignorant of Welsh gave a feeling of something being desperately wrong, of something needing desperately to be set right.

But there had been no outpouring—nothing out of the common.

"You should have——" said Ned, and paused.

"What?" asked Ted.

"Nothing, except that it must be about time for us to be going back—to Paradise!"

CHAPTER IV

AURELIA in a blessed white frock, looking like a Botticelli angel, was in the garden talking to old Adam. She received their half-hearted apologies for return with a fine superiority.

"Of course," she said, "we all knew you were coming. Martha was unkind enough to kill a beautiful white chicken for you, and there is raspberry tart, and curds and cream. Oh yes! and I made a sponge-cake for tea. So you ought to have enough I'm sure. Now, before we go in, I do want to find my Ourisia coccinea, and Adam has mislaid it. Now, Adam, do think! and please don't say the underground mice have eaten the label, for I'm sure they haven't—it would be a miracle, you know, if they did."

Here she turned to her companions with shining eyes.

"You see, Adam believes in boggles and miracles, and all sorts of queer things, though he isn't Welsh. And to-day there was a miracle in church."

"A miracle," echoed Ned, flushing slightly and wondering more.

She nodded. "Yes! The organ that hasn't sounded a note for ever so long, played of itself, or rather Griffiths Morgan, the sexton, says he was awoke by the Archangel Gabriel."

"Nonsense," interrupted Ned with spirit, "it—it couldn't have been——"

"That is what Adam says," replied Aurelia smiling. "Adam! tell the story yourself."

"'Twain't much story, Miss Aura," put in the old gardener, "but 'twas how as this. Rector he bin preechin' of the roarin', rushin' wynd, an' as he coombed

down the chauntrey steps, as might be the Pope o' Rome with that there brass platter, it let loose quite suddint. A wynd, indeed, a rushin' and roarin', an' heavenly notes all a-dyin' away to twanks like the last Trump. Folks were greatly put about, even passon himself didn't know what to make on't till Griffiths Morgan, as sleeps on the beller's 'andle through being accustomed to it as a lad, said he was woke and bid blow by the Archangel Gabriel. Whereupon passon give it 'im for sleepin', and says as he must a' laid on the notes somehow; but I says, says I, that nothin' but true miracle 'ud ever make the broken-wynded old orgin' give out sech a rare 'ollerin'."

"But there's no such thing as a miracle, Adam," declared the girl, and the next moment was on her knees peering into an aster patch. "Why, there it is," she cried, "Oh! Adam, how could you?"

Adam stooped over the border in simulated astonishment.

"Why, drat my garters" (this was his most extreme form of words). "So be it. Well, miss, 'tis true miracle how that pr'anniel stuff comes up, libel or no. 'Tis the Lord's doings, as don't call 'em by name, see you."

"But Adam did," said Ned, relieved as the necessity for confessing that he was not the Archangel Gabriel vanished before this change of venue.

"What Adam?" asked Aura. "Oh! I suppose you mean the one in the Bible, only grandfather doesn't believe in it, you know. It couldn't, anyhow, be this one," she continued, her eyes shining with laughter once more as they moved across the lawn, leaving Adam shaking his head over the Ourisia coccinea, "for when he digs my borders he begins by collecting all the tallies into a heap; then he puts them back again at regular intervals in a row. It's very funny, you know, but terribly confusing. Each spring I have to rack my brains to think what each dear thing means as it peeps up. Of course, that is interesting in itself, but"—here her eyes grew clearer, lighter as she looked up for sympathy—"it is

rather sad to make mistakes. I don't like dreaming a campanula is white when it is blue, blue when it is white.''

'' I think one is as beautiful as the other,'' laughed Ted.

'' Yes! ''—then her eyes sought Ned's—'' but it is hard, always, to lose what one has learnt to expect.''

He smiled back at her but said nothing.

So as they strolled over the grass, she, every now and again giving them a glimpse of the secluded busy life she led (for she and her grandfather never went into the village except, perhaps, to judge at some competition concert) the bell rang, and crossing to the verandah they found Mr. Sylvanus Smith less crippled as the day went on, but urbane and talkative as ever, while Martha, with her little bob curtsey, was waiting to take off the covers.

And they feasted like kings on the chicken and raspberry tart; and the weak rough cider which Martha made, and Mr. Smith drank for his rheumatism, seemed to get into their heads with the Wine of Life, as they sat and talked and watched Aurelia against the background of flower and fruit.

'' Oh! cupbearer! save the Wine of Life, what gifts canst thou bring? '' quoted Ned suddenly under his breath.

'' A fine poet Hâfiz—a very fine poet,'' remarked Sylvanus Smith, who appeared to have read and remembered most things, '' but he lacks the true human spirit. He fuddles himself into content with mystic unrealities, and misses the great individual claim of each soul to freedom and equality. So unlike Byron.''

'' Very,'' assented Ned dryly.

Still the conversation did not languish, and when dinner was over they adjourned to another large room opposite the library, which was also empty of all things save a grand piano, an arm-chair, and a music rest. Here Ned settled himself down to accompany Ted and Aura as they sang, and finally, with apologies, for not being so

much at home on the piano as on the organ, persuaded Mr. Sylvanus Smith, who turned out to be a passed musician, into trying a Brahms sonata for piano and violin. And here Martha coming to announce tea found them still happily busy over the great piles of music that were ranged along the wall.

It was when Ned lingered to close the piano that Aura lingered also watching him quietly; but she made him start and blush violently by saying with a smile, "You were the Archangel Gabriel, weren't you?"

Taken aback as he was, his eyes met hers with a reflection of their confidence. "I was. But how did you find out?"

"I don't know," she said, a faint trouble coming into her face, "that is the worst of it. It was when we were running through the *Messiah*, something in your mind touched mine, I think. It happens sometimes, doesn't it? —and—and it isn't altogether pleasant."

She drew herself away from him instinctively, but he followed her.

"Why?" he asked.

She flashed round on him. "Because I dislike being touched."

There was a silence; finally he asked curiously, "Ought I to tell Adam?"

"Why should you? He loves miracles, and it will give him something to talk about, besides"—here she laughed —"it was a miracle, you know, to make the old organ sound at all."

"Perhaps," replied Ned, relieved of the necessity for confessing one of the many sudden impulses which were always getting him into trouble.

They found Martha by the tea-table looking very rakish and young in a coat and skirt and a sailor hat, which, however, did not prevent her from, as usual, masking her supremacy by subserviency. The gentlemen's rooms were quite ready for them, and as she was going through the village could she leave any message with the smith?

"Thanks, no!" replied Ted curtly, for he had noticed Aura's confidence with Ned, and had—he scarcely had time to think why—resented it; "but, I think, Cruttenden, that if we do avail ourselves of Mr. Smith's kindly offered hospitality, we must start at dawn, picking up our bicycles by the way."

"As you please, Ted," replied Ned carelessly. "But thanks all the same, Martha. I hope there will be no more miracles in church."

"Thank *you*, sir," retorted Martha cheerfully, "but I don't 'old with church nor yet with chapel neither. As I keep tellin' of Adam, they makes people think too much of their sins. An' 'is is but what we cooks call second stock at that, sir; for takin' 'im, fine an' wet, Adam do 'is work like a real Briton—yes! he really do——"

With which testimonial to Adam's worth she bobbed another curtsey, and was off for her panacea for all ills, a "spin on her bike."

"I suppose," said Ted after a pause, in a somewhat awed voice, "that Adam is Martha's husband."

Aura bubbled over with quick mirth. "Martha's husband! Oh dear, no! Why, she is always at me 'not to incline to no man, no; not if his 'air be 'ung round with gold'; and just think of Adam's little cropped head!"

Her laugh was infectious.

"And so Martha shares the—the family dislike to gold," suggested Ned slyly.

Mr. Sylvanus Smith rose to the fly at once. "We do not dislike it, sir; gold has undoubtedly its appointed place in the world, but it happens to be in its wrong place. So I disregard it, and pay all my bills by cheque."

"Martha makes out the lists for the Army and Navy, you know," explained Aura quickly. "It's rather fun unpacking the boxes when they come."

"There is no doubt," continued Mr. Smith, in a tone of voice which suggested an effort to be strictly original, "that as now administered, money is the root of all evil. Our hoarded millions instead of, as they should, bringing

equality—comfortable, contented equality—to the world, separate man from his fellow man by a purely artificial distinction; they bring about class antagonism, and are a premium on inept idleness.''

'' Hear, hear!'' said Ted. '' I quite agree with you, sir. If these millions were equitably divided——''

'' They would be a premium on idle ineptitude instead,'' laughed Ned lightly. '' If you gave a loafer the same wage as a working man, I for one would loaf. It is the better part. If any one were to offer me a golden sovereign at the present moment, Miss Aura——''

She arrested the teapot in the middle of pouring out his second cup, and glanced up at him in smiling horror.

''And I never gave back the one in Cockatua's bread and milk tin! Dear me, what should I have done if you had gone away and left it? I'll remember it after tea.''

But after tea found them still laughing, still talking, still sitting silent awhile listening to the song of a thrush which, as the day drew down to dusk, sat on the bent branch of the old yew to sing as surely never thrush sang before.

So the moon climbed into the sky and the flowers faded into the ghosts of flowers, each holding just a hint of the hues it had worn by day.

'' What a pity it is to go to bed at all,'' said Aura suddenly, leaning over her grandfather's chair and laying her cheek on his thick, white hair; '' for we seem to have so much to say to each other, don't we? ''

He winced slightly; since for once he had forgotten the absorption of his later years, and had let himself be as he would have been but for the tragedy which he had fled into the wilderness to hide. For he had seen his wife starve to death, and his daughter sell herself for bread, while he, struck down by rheumatic fever, had waited for the tardy decision of a Law Court. The verdict had come too late for either; too late for anything but decent burial for a poor, young mother, and flight, if possible, from himself. But, though he forgot sometimes, the

tragedy of seeing his wife die before his helplessness, it remained always to blur his outlook, to make him what he was, a half-crazy visionary.

And to-night he had forgotten. He had laughed at trivialities, and told trivial stories of the thousand-year-old yew tree, and the Druidical legends connected with the summer solstice—the real midsummer night, though St. John's Day came later.

But now remembrance came back, and he rose. "We have talked too much," he said almost captiously, "and these gentlemen have to leave at dawn. We wish them good luck, don't we? Come, Aurelia, my child."

So they had said good-bye; but five minutes afterwards, as the two young men sat silently finishing their pipes, they saw her returning over the lawn, holding the sovereign in her raised right hand.

It seemed to them as if the whole world came with her as, rising to their feet instinctively, they waited beside the cool, dark pool, full of the black shadows of the yew tree, full also of marvellous moonlit depths going down and down into more and more light.

The air was heavy with the flower fragrance of the garden, the round moon, large, soft, mild, hung in the velvety sky, not a breath stirred in earth or heaven, her very footstep on the turf was silent.

"Which of you gave it me?" she asked. "You are so much alike, at first, that I forget."

They were silent, uncertain what to claim, what not to claim.

She smiled. "Is it a puzzle? You want me to find out; but really, I expect it came from you both."

"Yes, from us both," assented Ned.

Her eyes were on Ted's face, which was good indeed to look upon, but she turned swiftly to Ned.

"Ah! It was you, of course. Yes, it was you," she said, holding out the coin. He took it without a word.

"It seems a shame to go to bed this heavenly night, but you have to be up so early." There was regret in her voice.

"Why should we?" said Ned impulsively. "Let us roam the hills, I have done it before now, alone."

She stood looking at them both, her face mysteriously bright.

"And you?" she asked of Ted.

He laughed. "I feel like it to-night, anyhow."

"Ah," she said, nodding her head, "you are a wise man. Good-night and pleasant dreams."

They watched her pass in her white raiment across the lawn, taking the glamour of the night with her, and leaving them with an ordinary moon shining on an ordinary garden.

Then Ted gave a short laugh and flung himself on the turf again, resuming his pipe.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned imperturbably.

"Nothing. I was only thinking of all the gassing you let out yesterday concerning money. Why, it means—everything! Hang that sovereign to your watch-chain, man, and then you can tell her a romantic tale when——"

A "*whitt whitt, whitter,*" followed by a sudden sob among the shadows and lights of the pool, told of one more duck-and-drake——

"As if that made any difference," he continued sardonically. "You have plenty more of them."

"So far as I'm concerned, it makes some difference," retorted Ned with spirit. "That particular coin won't be put to baser uses."

There was a pause, broken only by Ned's vain effort to get his cheroot to draw. Suddenly he flung it aside, edged himself out of the shadow into the light and faced his namesake.

"Look here, Cruttenden," he said, "I've got something to explain to you, because—well—because I want this thing to be fair and square between us. The fact is, that though my name is Edward Cruttenden all right, I have the misfortune to have been for the last two years, most unexpectedly, Lord Blackborough."

"Lord Blackborough!" echoed Ted slowly. "Why—

why, you're—you're my master—that is to say, I'm one of your clerks—and—and you're the richest man in the midlands."

"I believe I was, a year ago; but money doesn't stick by me. I wasn't brought up to it. Yes, I became Lord Blackborough against my will, by the death of my uncle, a cripple, who inherited the barony—bought by screws chiefly—from the original purchaser, who had a fit on hearing that his only son had shot himself over a woman. A squalid story, and the distinction between us is, as you see, a purely artificial one——"

"I quite agree with your lordship," interrupted Ted.

"My dear fellow," replied Lord Blackborough, "you will oblige me by not being a garden ass. The fact is, we have a considerable likeness to each other outside, in which you have distinctly the advantage. You're taller, broader; briefly, the better looking. As to the inside, we differ somewhat, but there again you have the qualities which make for wealth, and I haven't. I can see myself a poor man in my old age. Then we tumbled off our cycles together in an equal way. In a still more equal way we have tumbled into—let us say, this Garden of Eden. Now, why shouldn't we remain in it on equal terms?"

"Because it is impossible. You are Lord Blackborough, and I am your clerk."

"But why should we not remain the brothers Cruttenden? In this remote——"

"Impossible," repeated Ted angrily.

"Anyhow, let us think over it. We agreed, didn't we, to spend our holiday together. Well, let us talk it over, and if it is feasible, come back——"

Ted laughed bitterly. "A clerk hasn't so much holiday as a lord. I've had my week, while you——"

"Yes, of course; don't, please, go off at a tangent like our host. We have got to work this thing out somehow, for, unless we do—well—I won't come back alone, so you would always have that between you and your night's rest. Do you understand?"

Ted nodded sulkily. He had liked his companion before he knew he was a lord, and now all the Englishman's love for one, that strange modern inversion which grants quality to title, instead of as in the beginning granting title to quality, was mixed up in the thought of future friendship with one who would, who *could* be such a friend.

"Of course, I could buy you off, or turn you out. Now, don't fume. I won't interfere with your personal liberty if I can help it. I really am in deadly earnest. It seems to me we have been given a lead over—that there is something behind all this. However, that is neither here nor there, so far as you are concerned." He sat for a moment thinking.

"When can you get your next holiday?" he asked abruptly.

"I believe I could get a week at Christmas," admitted Ted grudgingly.

Lord Blackborough sprang to his feet like a schoolboy, and laughed. "How will Eden look under snow? Jolly, I expect——"

"You don't mean——" began Ted, rising also.

"Yes, I do. I mean that, so far as I'm concerned, we shall say good-bye to it—till Christmas—at dawn—the dawn which will so soon be coming. Good Heavens!" he added, his eyes on the horizon of the hills, his voice softening infinitely, "why *am* I going to bed? Who knows? Perchance to dream. Good-night."

Ted could hear him going on with the quotation as he strolled over to the house. Thereinafter there was a light in one of the upper windows, and then darkness.

He himself sat for a while thinking over the queer chances of the last few days. It was like a novel; not like real life. That hundred pounds, for instance, lying out on the hillside ready for any one who chose to take it. There had been plenty of chances of a hundred pounds even in his life, had he felt any immediate necessity for them, but he had not. His life on the whole had been pleasant enough. Fond of football, cricket, cycling, row-

ing, he had not thought much of the delights of money getting. But now? A hundred pounds well laid out, for instance on that investment about which his old school friend, a clerk on the Stock Exchange, had written him only last week, might well be a thousand by Christmas.

It held him fast that hundred pounds, thinking what could be done with it by Christmas.

It might win him Aurelia. For if in other ways equality could be kept up, why shouldn't he have a fair chance? He was the better looking—if that counted for anything. Then he had another advantage. Though he was long past much of the old man's antiquated Socialism, he was keen on more modern ideas, a Radical of the most forward type politically, whereas Lord Blackborough—what was Lord Blackborough? Well, he was a very good fellow anyhow.

Yes, he was a good fellow, though he was right in saying money didn't stick to him. How could it, when he left it, so to speak, lying about.

Ted knocked out the ashes of his pipe, and, after a space, another light showed in one of the upper windows. Then it went out, and the window eye was shut.

But what of the eyes within. Were they shut or open?

Who knows?

Were their owners asleep or awake, conscious that they had reached a crossing of the ways—that one path led up to the rugged mountain-tops, the other into the smooth valleys.

Who knows?

The moon shone softly behind a haze of midnight coolness, rising from the earth to blur the clear circle of her heavenly rim.

There was a breathlessness in the very stillness of the night, that was broken only by the distant wailing of the lambs new-separate from their mothers.

Hark! What was it they were calling? Faint and far away, what was it?

"*Aura! Aura! Aura!*"

Up in the corries, setting the tall brackens a-quiver,

high on the birch woods hidden in their silver, higher still among the tumbled rocks of the "Eye of the World," what was that passing?

Was it, white and dim, a wandering sheep looming large upon the moonlit mountainside as it sought to answer the cry, or, this midsummer night when the spirits wander, was it a restless wraith seeking it knew not what?

Or was it Aura herself, free and fearless among the hills?

"*Aura! Aura! Aura!*"

The faint, far-distant call sounded from the valley, from the corries, from the birch woods, from the rocks.

The shadows lay so still, so soft, yet that one surely moved—moved upwards.

"*Aura! Aura! Aura!*" Was it Aura, or only the echoing sound of the calling lambs?

Still, soft, equable, serene, oh, misty mountain moonlight what didst thou hold?

And in the garden across the lawn, where the girl's feet had lain, was that curved shadow, a snake making its way to the black and white shadow of the Druid's yew tree?

Oh, misty moonlight of the valley what didst thou hold, as the faint, far-away cry echoed between the hills, and up into high heaven?

Did they meet and hold converse face to face upon the mountain-top, those wandering lights and shadows on the mountainsides? or did they wander, searching for something, until dawn, and find nothing?

. . . . . .

Dawn at any rate came soon, as Ned had said it would.

The moonlight changed swiftly to sunlight, the heifer lowed for her bull-calf, a sleepy chaffinch chirruped his challenge to the coming day, and Ted Cruttenden coming into the verandah from the library saw Ned entering it from the music room, while at the hall door between them stood Aurelia, blushing at being caught so early.

She was in a loose, white overall, girded in at the waist

with a leathern girdle, and her bare feet were shod in sandals.

"Good-morning," she said, without any trace of the blush in her voice. "See what I have found under the old yew tree. Grandfather's chair had torn the turf, and there it was. Do you think it can be the snake-ring grandfather told us about?"

The flat, bead-like stone she held out was no larger than a sixpence, but it had a hole through its greenish, semi-opaque lustre.

"I think it must be," said Ted, passing it on to Ned. "You will have 'all the wealth of the world.' Wasn't that what it is supposed to bring?"

"But I don't want money," she said.

"The wealth of the world is not all money," smiled Ned, handing the stone back to her. "There is love."

She laughed merrily. "I don't want that either. No! not if 'is 'air be 'ung round with gold."

They waved a good-bye to her from the turn of the draw-bridge.

"Till Christmas," said Ned cheerfully.

"Till Christmas," replied Ted cheerfully.

They found the village early astir. Miss Myfanwy Jones's holiday having come to an end, she was starting for Williams and Edwards with a pile of empty dress and bonnet boxes, which Alicia Edwards, the Reverend Morris Pugh, and the Adonis Mervyn were packing into the village shandrydan.

"It is most kind of you gentlemen to be up so early," said Myfanwy, dispensing her smiles impartially. "It is no use asking you, Mr. Morris," she said, throwing a little flavouring of regret into her voice, "you are too busy and too good; but if Mr. Mervyn comes up to town I trust he will call on me."

Mervyn, whose front lock looked exactly as if it had just left a curling-pin's care, nodded at her approvingly.

"That would be jolly fun," he said. "I have to go up for an examination in September."

"Good-bye, then, till September. Good-bye, Alicia."

As she kissed the latter she whispered, "That will be a guinea to your account for the hat."

"You said a pound," protested Alicia.

"That was for cash, child. And what is a shilling? But two sixpences; and you shall pay when you are married, see you."

CHAPTER V

WOULD anything stop those waves except a Cornish coast? thought Helen Tressilian, as she watched the green-blue, solid water slip over a half-sunk rock, and with unabated strength, send up against a higher shelving mass a forty-foot column of reckless spray.

And the sky was so blue, the sun so hot, bringing out all the aromatic odours of the cliff herbs. How sweet they were! It would almost be worth while to be a humble bee to work so busily among the purple thyme. She let some heads of it she had picked fall on her lap with a little listless gesture. Yes! to work instead of droning out the days. To work as Herbert, the dead young husband of her dreams, had meant to work. It was seven years since she had lost him in Italy, whither they had gone on their honeymoon for his health. So he lay there dead through the breaking of a blood vessel; dead without a good-bye; dead under the blue sky amid the orange blossoms, while she, after her mother's death, kept house for her father, Sir Geoffrey Pentreath. And still on her roughest serge suits she wore the conventional muslin of widowhood round her throat and wrists.

And in her heart? In her heart she had set up such a fetich of bereavement that the idea of a second marriage was unthinkable. Yet it would have been advisable. The death of her only brother in South Africa sent the few farms, which was all that remained of the great Pentreath estates, to a distant cousin, and for long years past Sir Geoffrey had had no ready money. Poor father! It was the thought of her which made him——

She glanced to the left, over a great scaur of tumbled rocks like some giant's house in ruins, gave a little shiver and buried her face in her hands.

Poor father! Yet how could he? And how could he be mixed up with all those fateful, hateful people with money, who brought their *chauffeurs* to the old serving-hall at the Keep? Those *chauffeurs* were the bane of her life; for what should she give them to eat!

Some one from behind clasped her wrists close, and held her hands still on her eyes.

"Guess!" said a sepulchrally gruff voice.

"My dear Ned! Where have you come from?" she answered gaily.

"How did you find out?" asked Ned Blackborough, seating himself on the thyme beside her.

"As if any one but Ned Cruttenden—I can't help the name, my dear—was ever quite so hoarse!"

"By George, Nell," he said, looking seawards, "it is good to be here. That's what one always says, isn't it, when the visible Body of the Lord is transfigured before one's eyes as it is now."

"You know, Ned, I do not agree with your Buddhistic notions," she said, a trifle severely.

"Beg pardon! They're not Buddhistic; but I'm al-always forgetting you don't like—though you will some day! Meanwhile I want to ask you a question: and as the butler told me you would be on the coast somewhere . . . you've a most superior set of London servants just now, Nell——"

"To keep the *chauffeurs* company," she interrupted, shrugging her shoulders. "One must—but don't let's talk of it—it's sickening—— And so you came to the old place?"

"To the old place, Nell," he repeated, looking at her with criticising eyes of kind affection, and thinking she looked as though she stood in need of physical and moral backing; "I always think of you here, looking out to sea, just under Betty Cam's chair——" he nodded his head backwards to the scaur of tumbled rocks. "If you get looking so long, Nell, you will be seeing ghostly things—like she did. She was your ancestress, you know, and it isn't safe——"

He spoke tentatively, but she evaded him. "You said you had a question," she asked; "what is it?"

"Only if you have room at the Keep?"

She laid her hand on his in swift reproof—"Was there ever a time when there was not room?"

He smiled. "True; but unfortunately I've—I've a second self now."

"Ned!" She stared at him. "Oh Ned! How could you—without a word! Who is she?"

"It is a he, my dear. We collided together and found out our respective names were the same. But of that anon. And there is a Scotch doctor too—a rattling good fellow, one Peter Ramsay, whom we picked up—but of that also anon. Meanwhile these are at the 'Crooked Ewe' regaling themselves, and—well! I can't leave them, you see, for they're my guests, but—but we could dine with the *chauffeurs*, you know."

"Don't be silly, Ned! Of course you must come. There's still room in the ruins for the family—and *you* won't mind——"

She broke off suddenly, and looked out to sea.

"Tired, Nell?" he asked quietly. "How you fuss, my dear cousin!"

"Who could help fussing?" she said without looking at him. "We could live so comfortably, father and I, on what we have got, if it were not for this craze of his to make money for me. Ah, Ned! I wish you had never lent him that fifteen thousand."

It was nearer twenty-five thousand, but that fact lay lightly on Ned Blackborough's mind.

"I believe it to be an excellent investment," he remarked coolly, "though I own I didn't know what he wanted it for at the time."

"And you don't know now?" she broke in passionately. "There it stands—despicable utterly—facing the sea—that sea." She pointed to it appealingly.

Ned looked out to the clear horizon, so definite yet so undefined, where a liner, after taking its bearings from the lighthouse far away to the west, was steering straight

up Channel. It seemed to glide evenly between sea and sky, and yet here the thunder of each wave filled the air with sound. Ay! a sea not to be safely faced by anything despicable.

"You are letting this beast of an hotel get on your mind, Nell," he said, after a pause. "After all, half the white and coloured cliffs of Old England are so desecrated——"

"Don't excuse it," she interrupted almost fiercely; "it's inexcusable. When I think what Jeff would have said—Jeff who loved every stone—dear old Jeff——" She broke off and hid her face in her hands.

"Curse South Africa!" said Ned under his breath.

She looked up after a while. "You see," she began more composedly, "what stings is that it is all done for me; and I—fifty pounds a year would keep me going as a hospital nurse; and I shall never be anything else, Ned, never! I lost everything for myself seven years ago, and what I have belongs to others. And there is so much in the past for which atonement should be made. You don't belong to the Pentreaths, you see; but they were a wild race—Betty Cam, as you reminded me! Think of her! Why, Ned, when I see at night that hateful place all lit up with electric light and shining far, far out to sea, I feel as if we were doing it all over again! Luring ships to the rocks!"

"My dear Nell, what an imagination you've got!" expostulated her cousin.

She pulled herself up. "Have I? But it is so useless. And it seems to get worse and worse since Mr. Hirsch came in. He is at the Keep now, arranging for a light railway. And oh, Ned! the place where we used to picnic as children—you remember, of course—is all placarded as 'eligible building-sites.'"

Ned whistled, and looked out to sea. As he had said, the white cliffs of Marine England were so disfigured everywhere; but that did not bring much consolation for the destruction of absolute beauty.

"Well," he said, "I only hope some one may think

them so, and that the hotel is crowded up to the garrets. It's got to be; for the farmers and the little shopkeepers at Haverton, who put their piles into it—because my uncle did—will expect a dividend!"

"And the others too," she added bitterly. "You know Mr. Hirsch has floated it. It's quoted on the Stock Exchange now, and they are going to run up select jerry-built villas with the money they get on the new shares, as they ran up the jerry-built hotel——"

"With mine," laughed Ned, a trifle uneasily. "Well, my dear child, I hadn't any intention of building it—but it's there—and let us come and look at it. It can't help, can it, being in a lovely spot?"

"Can't it?" she said coldly; "but I try to forget its existence—it gets on my nerves."

"Apparently," he said quietly.

"And so it would on yours," she retorted, "if you lived within hail of it, and nothing else was talked about day and night. But there—let's leave it alone! You can see it on your way to the 'Crooked Ewe.' We shall expect you to lunch, of course."

"Thanks," he replied; "and—and I think you'll like the Scotch doctor—he is so awfully keen. So full too of his work at Blackborough. He is house-surgeon, I think, to some hospital there."

Her face, a moment before, almost sullen in its obstinate objection, lit up at once. "Not St. Peter's!" she cried. "How interesting—— Why! it is the best, they say, in the kingdom; and I mean to have my training in the children's ward there."

"You look rather as if you ought to go there as a patient, Nell," he replied, shaking his head; "and you are a perfect child still. I wonder if you will ever learn——"

"What?" she asked quickly.

"Yourself," he laughed, as he started up the scaur.

Betty Cam's chair lay at the top; a huge slab of gneiss with another forming the back, bearing no particular resemblance to a chair at all. Still there it was that Betty

Cam, the witch, used to sit, and, after lighting her false fire, fling her arms about and mutter incantations till deadly storms arose.

Many are such stories, current on the wild west coast, and still firmly believed of the people; none perhaps better authenticated than this, that on the nights of fierce sou'westers a glow of light could still be seen at Betty Cam's chair, and that more than once the ghost of the ghostly Indiaman which, with all sails set, had sailed one awful winter's night straight up the bay, straight over the cliff, nipped up Betty Cam, and sailed away with her right over far Darty-moor to Hell, had been seen pursuing the same extraordinary course.

Ned felt as if he could have put other folk aboard for that trip, as, cresting the hill-top, he came full in sight of the Sea-view Hotel.

He sat down promptly on the chair, and gave a low whistle of dismay.

Cam's point, as he had known it, that gorse-covered promontory sheer down in purpling cliff to the blue-green sea, was gone. In its place was an ineffectual attempt at a—at a tea-garden! Winding walks here, winding walks there, meandering toward aimless summer-houses, kiosks, bandstands, which were recklessly scattered about the bare soil. For it was bare. Gorse would grow there, or scented purple thyme, or any of the innumerable small aromatic herbs which the south-west wind loves, but grass and most garden flowers were helpless before the constant breeze, which, instant in season and out of season, swept over the point laden with salt, and even in this flat, calm, June weather making the steel guy-ropes of the flag-staff hum like a hive of swarming bees.

As for the Sea-view—ye gods! the pestilential obviousness of that name!—Hotel, if it also were not guyed by ropes it looked as if it would be the better of it. What was it, standing on the very edge of the cliff—Italian—Greek—Gothic—or a Swiss chalet? There were reminiscences of all in its medley of inconsequent towers, gables, battlements, balconies. A lunatic asylum built by

the patients! Utterly irrational, utterly out of touch with its surroundings of earth, and sea, and sky. Yes! quite antagonistic to the little fishing village in the bay below, to the supreme fairness of the coast trending away westward in headland after headland. Above all, absolutely unfit to face that wide waste of water, so smooth, so silent on the far horizon, so restless, so clamorous in its assault on the near cliffs. You could hear the angry roar of the waves on the rocks, see the weather-stains on those thin walls.

And as he watched a strange thing came about. In every wide window of the huge façade a blaze of light showed, and round the arches hung with lamps in the tea-garden, a multi-coloured flash shone for a second, and then went out again.

They must be trying the electric light. Then he laughed suddenly. It tickled his fancy—apt to be vagrant—to think how this gigantic modern sham, full of false civilisation, full of lifts, lounges, bars, winter-gardens, a real up-to-date, twentieth-century substitute for a home, engineered on the latest American lines, must look to any home-bound ship passing up channel. A beacon distinctly; but a beacon warning the world against what?

"Trinity House and Betty Cam had better settle it between them," he muttered to himself, as, turning at right angles, he set off over the moorland to the "Crooked Ewe," where Peter Ramsay and Ted Cruttenden were awaiting him.

He had picked up the former crossing over from Cardiff to Ilfracombe, and finding he had a few days to spare before taking up his new appointment, Ned had asked him to come on with him and see the prettiest part of Cornwall, and perhaps stop a night with his uncle Sir Geoffrey Pentreath—if there was room.

He wondered rather how Helen had found this room, as he looked round the long lunch table; but, as his uncle confided to him, half of the guests belonged to the hotel. There had been a committee of ways and means, and sev-

eral people—notably Mr. Robert Jenkin, who was sitting next Helen—were over from Wellhampton for the day. Yes! that was Mr. Hirsch at her other side, a most able man, but rather too near his *bête noire*, Mr. Jenkin, to show to advantage.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Hirsch was making himself extremely disagreeable to his enemy by insisting on keeping the conversation at a much higher level of culture than any to which Mr. Jenkin could aspire, for he had begun and gone on with life for a considerable time as a local ironmonger. Then fortune had favoured him, and he became the local millionaire, remaining still, however, so Mr. Hirsch declared, "the petty tradesman."

The latter was a very clever, very dapper little German Jew, with nothing to show his ancestry and his age, except a slight foreign lisp, and a still more slight tendency to size below the last button of his waistcoat, a tendency which gave him more concern than it need have done, since it really only showed in profile. For the rest, he was inscrutably good-natured. Money stuck to him, and his many kindnesses never interfered with his keen eye for business—or beauty.

It was Helen's handsome, melancholy face which had been the secret of his interest in Sir Geoffrey's venture; on the principle of opposites, it is to be supposed, since he was a frank pagan, a *bon viveur* born.

So he talked lightly of Rome, and a few of the crowned heads of Europe with whom he had a bowing acquaintance; but finding this rather too interesting to Mr. Jenkin, he settled down on Bayreuth, and gossiped *Parsifal*, becoming after a time really engrossed, and saying almost with tears in his eyes, "Ah! my dear lady, how I should love to show you it."

He felt seriously sentimental; in truth, the remark was as near a proposal as he had gone for quite a number of years.

"We intend, Mrs. Tressilian," put in Mr. Jenkin, not to be outdone, "to get the Yaller Peking band down from the Halls durin' our season—July-August. It'll play

durin' meals, an' after dinner in the Pirates' Pavilion. An' I'm sure, Mrs. Tressilian, the conductor—he ain't really a Chinaman, ma'am, the pig-tail bein' only a thing to catch on—ha! ha! ha! that ain't a bad joke, is it, Hirsch? Pig-tails a thing to catch on to—ha! ha! ha!"

Mr. Hirsch surveyed him with distasteful wonder.

"You don't wear one, do you, Mr. Jenkin?" he asked suavely, his foreign accent coming out, as it always did, when he was annoyed.

"No, sir, I don't," snapped his adversary; "but as I was sayin', ma'am, I'm sure if you had a hankerin' after any particular tune, he'd play it. I don't know about Percival, but his *repertoire* of Cake Walk is the first, I'm told, in Europe."

Meanwhile Ned Blackborough was taking stock of the rest of the company. On the whole—queer! The Wrexhams he knew, of course. She went in for spiritualism and he for spirits; both good enough sorts even at that; but the bulk smelt distinctly of money.

And his uncle?

Ned had not seen him for over a year, and he was frankly taken aback by the change in him. His face, weakly handsome as ever, hale still in its thin ruddiness, had lost the cheery look which had survived even the death of his only son, who had "died as a Pentreath should." This and such vague comfortings regarding "rest," and being "with his mother," and of the youthful company whom "the gods love,"—comfortings with which humanity has always met bereavement, had not only been on his lips, but in his heart. He had always been an optimist—and now? Anxiety sat on every feature. The man was haggard. And what was this grievance against Helen which made such sentences as "Mrs. Tressilian will have her own opinion, no doubt," or "You must ask my daughter; I cannot answer for her," quite noticeably frequent in his conversation.

As he sat listening while his next-door neighbour, a very talkative and a very deaf lady, assured him that her motor, which she had bought in Paris, was the only one

of its kind in England, and that it was absolutely, entirely, shakeless and noiseless, Lord Blackborough had time for cogitation.

They were very smart people, and it was a very smart luncheon: champagne, *pâte-de-foie en aspic,* liquers, and cigarettes on the lawn. A new *régime* certainly for the kindly old Keep, where, as a boy, he had spent his holidays with his aunt, his mother's sister. Yes! a new *régime,* especially if the *chauffeurs* were being similarly regaled downstairs!

And what a fine old place it was! set so deep out of the way of the wind in a hollow of old pines and oaks, and yet so close to the sea that even now the hollow boom of the Atlantic waves sounded against the shrill voices of those smart women as a bassoon sounds against a violin. Ay! and in the winter sou'-westers, the rush and hush of the sea blent with the rush and hush of the leaves. He could imagine Betty Cam—h'm, that was Helen's fault for being so tragic! He looked round for her, and saw her talking to Dr. Ramsay. Ted also was well employed, hanging on Mr. Hirsch's lips as he spoke airily of bulls and bears. Ted, if he didn't take care, would become a zoologist also!

So thought Ned Blackborough as he wandered away from the lawns that were still kept smooth and green, towards the wilderness of garden beyond. And the thought of money bringing the thought of Aura, he smiled, lit a cigar, and went still further afield to find a certain peach tree that used to have peaches on it.

The others were happy; why should he not have his share of enjoyment?

As a matter of fact, however, Helen and Dr. Ramsay were not enjoying themselves; at least *she* was not, for he had met her assertion that the one wish of her life ("since my husband's death seven years ago," being interpolated with the usual note of resigned reverence in her voice) had been to be a hospital nurse, with a dubious shake of the head.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he said slowly. "I rather

doubt your being fit for it. One requires a lot of stamina.''

She stared at him almost haughtily. '' But I am very strong, I assure you,'' she replied, with a smile of great tolerance, '' I daresay I look pale—for the Cornish coast; but, oh! I am very strong! ''

'' Physically, perhaps.'' His Scotch accent gave the qualification great precision.

''Then, mentally——'' she almost gasped.

'' Mentally, no,'' he replied quite calmly.

'' Excuse me,'' she remarked, '' but I really do not think you know me well enough.''

'' Do I not? '' he remarked, his brown eyes smiling into hers; '' you forget that I am a doctor, and, Mrs. Tressilian, your nervous system is at the present moment —mind you, it's no blame—in absolutely unstable equilibrium.''

'' Unstable equilibrium! Really, Dr. Ramsay——''

'' My dear lady,'' he said, '' I have been thinking all lunchtime that if you would only allow yourself to be hypnotised, you would be clairvoyant. I shouldn't wonder if you would be able to project yourself! and think what that might mean! Why, you might give us a clue——'' he paused quite excited.

''And what has that to do with nursing? '' she asked coldly.

'' It makes for a temperament that is too—what shall I call it?—unpractical. You have a gift—a great gift—but it is not for nursing; you are too sentimental.''

''And how do you arrive at that conclusion? '' she asked, interested in spite of herself.

'' Excuse me! '' He touched the muslin cuff she wore with a hand she could not help admiring: it was so shapely, so strong, so skilful-looking, albeit so small for a man of his height.

Yet her eyes flashed a quick challenge at him. '' You mean that it is sentimental and unpractical to mourn those one loves. I do not agree with you.''

The sunlight glinting through his eyes turned them

almost to amber. There was a world of gentle raillery in them at which, however, it was impossible to be angry.

"To wear your heart on your sleeve?—yes," he replied. "Ah, Mrs. Tressilian, believe me, you are lost to the world! What a wife you would have made with your ardent imagination to some grovelling slave tied down, as I am, by the nose, to the body of things! But that is another story, and so is clairvoyance, though in your present state I'm convinced you could see. The point at issue remains that——" he paused.

"Well!" she asked almost eagerly.

He laughed. "My patients say I prescribe Paradise, when I beg them not to fash themselves. But there is one thing I have found out. I can't tell you why, but worry stops the working of the vital machine. It gets into the cogs somehow and clogs the wheels. Then you fall back on reserve-force, and having exhausted that, feel exhausted. We doctors nowadays are helpless before the feeling of hustle. We prescribe rest-cures, but you can worry as much, perhaps more, on the flat of the back! The remedy lies with the patient. And you have so much imagination, Mrs. Tressilian. Used cheerfully, it is the most valuable therapeutic agent we have. Ah! here comes your father. Some of the hotel people want to take us all back to tea, and I expect he is coming to ask you about it."

She looked at him steadily, but he showed no consciousness, and she turned to meet Sir Geoffrey feeling baffled. She had known about and had meant to avoid this tea; but something in the very directness of Dr. Ramsay's unsought diagnosis roused her to show him its incorrectness.

Anyhow she found herself rather to her disgust not only going to the hotel, but going in the front seat of Mr. Hirsch's motor.

And once in the wide, south-western verandah—which was built so close to the perpendicular cliff that leaning over the balustrade you could see nothing but the sea—while the salt wind clung to her cheek like the fierce kiss

of a lover, bringing with it an unwonted flush of colour, she was forced to admit that the place had its charms; that it was not all vulgarised. There was laughter and music, of course (both of them loud), about the tea-tables, but at the further end comparative peace reigned around the couch of an invalid lady, whose little girl was apparently a great friend of Sir Geoffrey's. He was always so good to children, she remembered with a pang, picturing herself as she was at little Maidie's age.

The child's mother, Amy Massingham, was very dark—dark, with those large lustrous eyes, and very white teeth, which suggest Indian blood; and she must have been beautiful before languor and pallor had come instead of rich colour and vivacity. Still, even at her best she could never have touched the exceeding brightness and beauty of her little daughter Maidie. She was incomparable. A little vivid tropical bird flitting about Sir Geoffrey, chattering, her small round face glowing with brilliant tints, sparkling, dimpling, her teeth showing in a flash of smiles that seemed to irradiate her body and soul, while her cloud of dark hair, still golden bronze at its curly tips, floated about with her.

She was like a ripe pomegranate, yellow and red-brown in her dainty little yellow silk frock.

Perched now on Sir Geoffrey's long lap, she was stroking his soft moleskin knees, and swinging herself backwards and forwards rhythmically.

"And when daddie comes flom India," she insisted, " we won't go 'way and leave 'oo, Sir Geoffley, will we, mumsie? We'em goin' to stop at Seaview always, an' always, an' always. Ain't we, mums? "

Amy Massingham smiled gently: she did everything so very gently that she failed, as it were, to do anything at all. Her impact was not strong enough to move any fixed object.

" Well, my precious! It would be delightful, and dear Sir Geoffrey is so kind, isn't he? but I'm afraid dadda can't manage it. You see, Mrs. Tressilian, darling old

Dick is only home on short leave—really only to see me—but his people will want to have him first thing."

"Oh, mumsie! We'se goin' to have him the firstest thing of all," protested Maidie, who was now on the floor, fondling the big curly retriever who was always Sir Geoffrey's shadow, "for his ship'll pass over there—right over there, don't you see, Mrs. T'sllian."

She was by this time leaning over the balustrade beside Helen and looked up at her—such a sparkling, brilliant little maid!—with fearless eye. Something in the childless woman's heart went out to her, and beyond her again to the grave far away under the orange-trees of the man who was dying when she married him. If she could have had such a child!—it had been better, perhaps.

"Supposing we were to put up a signal here, saying, 'Mumsie and Maidie waiting for you,' wouldn't it be fun?" she said, smiling.

"Will you do it?" said the child quickly.

She shook her head. "It was only supposing, Maidie," she replied.

The little brilliant creature's face fell. "Oh! I wis' you would—make 'em stop right here, just this corner. I want him to stop, an' then I'd go on the ship too, an' sail, an' sail, an' sail." She had forgotten her disappointment in the new idea. That is what the world does generally, thought Helen; and yet——

"I suppose you love your father, don't you, Maidie?" she asked suddenly.

The child looked at her gravely. "'Normous much," she replied, repeating her stock phrase. "An' I love Sir Geoffley 'normous much too. We're goin' to live together, an' I'm to be his darlin' for ever an' ever an' nay! Ain't we? Ain't we?"

And she flung herself into his arms as he approached them, an unreserved joyous bundle of curls, smiles, and dimples. His face relaxed from the hard look of pressing anxiety it had worn all day. He caught the child up, tossing her like a feather above his long length, then cuddling her close to kiss.

"For ever, and ever, and aye!" he echoed; "Never fear, Maidie, I'm yours to command."

Then he set her down and turned to his daughter. "Helen!" he said, "I've some business here which may keep me awhile. You'll drive back with Hirsch, of course."

She did not meet his eyes, but kept hers far out at sea.

"I think not, father," she said gently, "I want to walk home with Ned. I have something to say to him."

Sir Geoffrey looked at her resentfully. "Ned has found a sick Indian friend upstairs and won't be available—you'd better go."

She turned round then. "No, father, I can't. It isn't fair—on him. Even coming here——" She broke off, and turned to the sea again.

He came closer, hesitated. "Nell," he said almost pitifully, "can't you—to please me? He really is a good fellow at bottom. I wouldn't ask it otherwise. It would free me—from you don't know what. And, my God! in London half the pretty women one meets are married to such awful bounders."

"It is because Mr. Hirsch isn't a bounder—because he really is in some ways a good fellow," she said, "that I will not—I can walk back with the others."

He stood looking at her with anger and affection in his eye for a moment, then strode off to say good-bye to Mrs. Massingham.

"I suppose your husband may drop in any moment," he said cheerfully.

"Any moment," she echoed, "we are so excited, Maidie and I. This morning we saw such a big vessel passing, right away on the horizon. The manager thought it might be a transport."

Maidie looked up and nodded her cloud of curls. "But it wasn't, you see," she said; "for she's—(here she nodded again at Helen)—goin' to signal 'Stop here!'"

"That was only supposing, Maidie!"

"Supposin', an' supposin', an' supposin'. 'Free

times 'free is 'free,'' quoted Maidie slyly, '' Just you wait an' see.''

'' Yes! wait and see,'' laughed Sir Geoffrey; '' Good-bye, little one! Next time, I suppose, daddy will have put my nose out of joint, and you won't have anything to say to me—eh? ''

She grew crimson to her ear-tips. '' Never! never! never! '' she cried, stamping her foot wilfully; ''we's goin' to live together for everan'everan'-aye! ''

The bystanders laughed at her sudden passion, and Sir Geoffrey's thin, ruddy face actually flushed a still deeper red.

''All right, little lady,'' he said half-sheepishly. '' Never you fear! I'll keep my promise for ever an' never an'-naye! ''

CHAPTER VI

THE London footman was rolling out the dressing-gong as if he had been apprenticed to a bronze, when Ned Blackborough returned from his sick friend at the Sea-view Hotel; but he took no heed to its warning, and turning down a side passage sought a room in the older part of the house where, as a rule, his uncle was to be found.

And sure enough, there he was, seated at his so-called writing-table, and turning round a trifle startled, pen in hand, at the sound of the opening door. But Ned's quick eye detected neither paper nor ink. The pen, then, was a mere shelter against the unlooked-for visitor.

It was a quaint room, full from floor to ceiling of the man and his immediate forbears, that succession of Sir Richards and Sir Geoffreys who had inherited the ever-lessening estate of Pentreath for the last two hundred years. Fishing-rods, guns, hunting-horns, and duelling-pistols testified to their amusements, a tin box labelled "Pentreath Estate Records," to their occupation, and a complete set of the *Annual Register* and *Gentleman's Magazine* to their literary tastes. There was a weighing-machine also, and in a glass case the sword presented to the then Sir Richard by Prince Charlie; for the Pentreaths were always on the losing side in everything. Yet they had always held their heads high in the past.

But now Sir Geoffrey's haggard face looked as if it had been seeking refuge in the hands, one of which he held out in kindly greeting.

"So it's you, Ned!—like old times. I'm glad to see you back again, my boy."

"And I'm glad to be back, sir," he replied, paused, and then feeling there was no good in beating about the bush, made a plunge.

"I've got something to say to you, sir. We are leaving to-morrow morning, and I may not have another opportunity——" he paused again.

"Not much time before dinner," said Sir Geoffrey, consulting his watch. "But fire away. Going to get married?—eh?"

"Perhaps," said Ned coolly, "but this is about the hotel."

"Damn the hotel! What's up now?" Never was curse more heartily or more hopelessly given. "Well—go on."

"I don't know who is responsible for installing the electric light, but it isn't safe. The wires are always fusing. They keep it very dark, but my friend—who is a bit of an electrical engineer himself—found out when he was awake last night——"

Sir Geoffrey's face was hidden by his hand again as he interrupted Ned with a short laugh.

"Oh! that's it — why, they always 'krab' each other's work—always! And—and your money's safe enough now; the place is insured."

"I wasn't thinking of the money, sir," cried Ned outraged. "I was thinking of all those women and children."

Sir Geoffrey's face came up from his hand full of such passionate resentment that Ned was fairly startled. "By Gad, sir!" he cried, "and what right have you to suppose I don't think of them? night and day, sir—day and night!" Then his eyes finding Ned's, he stretched out his hand towards him in almost childish helplessness. "Oh, Ned! Ned!" he said, "you can't think what a relief it is to talk of this with—with one of ourselves — with — with a gentleman instead of a cursed money grubber — though I will say this for Hirsch, he isn't a cad."

"Then you've known of this before, sir," said Ned slowly. "I see——"

"Known! My God! Ned, what haven't I known since the devil entered into me to start this thing! I

wouldn't tell you, Ned, for I knew you'd be like Helen; but I told the heir, and he liked it. All he wants is money. And I—all I wanted was to make something—just something for Helen after poor old Jeff—went. He'd have looked after her, you see—the Pentreaths have always kept our women well—always cared for them. But he died! Ay!''—here his trembling lip stiffened itself, '' died as a Pentreath should for his Queen and his country.''

In the pause that ensued Ned thought bitterly that he had died in an attempt to hold the yeomanry of England from showing the road to the rear. That was the truth, and behind that truth what a record of ignorance, ineptitude, greed of gain. Nothing for nothing, not even patriotism, was the modern motto; a cheap loaf and a disintegrated empire—*caveat emptor* even in the face of war.

'' You can't believe it all, Ned,'' went on Sir Geoffrey, speaking now with less passion but more eagerness, as if his memories brimmed over, '' until you've been through with it. I meant it all to be above board, but it wasn't. The jobbery was awful. Every man just clamouring for money. A gentleman oughtn't to touch a thing like that—it's pitch, Ned. He has to keep in with builders and masons and plumbers—Oh, my God!—the plumbers!—all thinking of nothing but ' pay, pay, pay.' Ah! Kipling knew the game when he wrote that refrain for England's heroism, her patriotism. It will go down to the ages, Ned, as one man's insight into what we English are becoming.'' He was walking up and down the room now, restlessly. '' They were all bad, but Jenkin was the worst—and he ought to have known. It was his nephew who put in the electric plant. You'll say I ought to have struck, Ned, and so I ought, but your money was gone, Ned, and their's too, poor devils!—a lot of the farmers and people only put in a few pounds because it was my idea, you see. It had to go on. And what did I know about sea-sand and second-class putty. It isn't gentleman's work and that's a fact. But the jolly old

Atlantic knew sharp enough and sent salt through the plaster and sea-spray through the concrete. . . . Then, when we were in a bad way, and Jenkin—pettifogging tradesman!—all for saving every penny, I met Hirsch. Between ourselves, Ned, he began by fancying Helen, and I—I—well! He isn't a cad, you know, and half those men one meets are; yet their wives don't—don't seem to mind."

He paused and looked at Ned Blackborough appealingly, but he was inexorable.

"Hardly the man I should have thought you'd have chosen, sir, as the father of your grandchildren."

Sir Geoffrey took it full in the face without flinching. "No," he said simply, "I suppose not. But I've gone down, Ned, gone down terribly. I sometimes wonder if she—if your aunt, I mean, would know me again if—if I saw her."

He took a turn or two without speaking, then gave an afterthought excuse which made Ned smile, and yet feel inclined to curse.

"But there mightn't be any children, you know. What good would they be—the old place has gone from the Pentreaths—gone utterly. Let me see—where was I? Oh yes! Hirsch came and saw it, and said it was the finest site in Britain. And so it is. There's not a better for health or beauty than Cam's point. So he put us on our feet again, and spent an awful lot on what he called 'colour wash.' At least it seems an awful lot to me, and Jenkin was wild. But we had to run it, or the new company wouldn't have caught on—we have to make it fizz, you see—but I wish to God I'd never begun,—I wish to God I'd never begun——"

He was still walking up and down muttering to himself.

"And meanwhile," asked Ned, in spite of his supreme pity, "what is to be done? The wires may fuse any moment—so Charteris thinks——"

Sir Geoffrey caught at the doubt—"It's not so bad as that—I don't think it's so bad. When the season's

over and the new company secure, we shall put a new plant in and insure the place properly. And meanwhile we are awfully careful. I was two hours there to-day myself, seeing what the workmen had done; and it was quite a little thing—put out in a moment.''

'' But you don't know anything about electricity, do you, sir? '' asked Ned quietly, '' and I thought you said it *was* insured.''

Sir Geoffrey's face reddened. '' Yes, in a way. Hirsch insured when he came in. He wouldn't put his money in without it.''

'' Would he put his wife and children in, I wonder? '' asked Ned bitterly. '' But I still don't quite understand about the insurance——''

Sir Geoffrey fidgeted. '' I'll get Hirsch to explain. It's all right, I believe, though. But they'll insure anything nowadays, if you pay a decent premium—any mortal thing.'' He paused and stood the image of hopeless perplexity; and then—rather to his relief—the dinner gong sounded. '' Good Lord! And I'm not dressed,'' he muttered, '' we'd better go.''

But as he reached the stairs where they divided, he held out that friendly, welcoming, family hand again, saying:—'' Thanks, Ned, it's been such an awful relief not to be thinking of money. I suppose when one comes into so much as you have, that—that you don't think of it any more? ''

Was it so, Ned Blackborough wondered. Hardly; for Mr. Hirsch had millions and still thought of more. No! he personally had been tired of money for some time. *Caveat emptor* was an excellent legal if not absolutely moral axiom; but when men allowed your millions to confuse the issue in their treatment of you, then—then one could wish the millions were not in the equation!

And of late—ever, in fact, since he had left the floating deposit and had seen Aura—he smiled at the remembrance of her standing framed in scarlet and white, handing back the sovereign with that peremptory '' Take it please! ''

Why should not he and she go forth in the wilderness in their sandalled feet to forget—and to remember? That was life. To forget so much, and to remember so much that one had forgotten.

He pulled himself up after a time from the unaccustomed line of thought or reverie, telling himself it was all nonsense—sheer nonsense. Yet it was attractive.

Suddenly the words "Go! sell all that thou hast," recurred to him, making him wonder if it were a hard saying or no. For the moment he felt inclined to obey it literally.

They were halfway through dinner ere Lord Blackborough appeared at the table. To begin with he had wired to his valet for dress clothes, and, accustomed to the routine of good service, had expected to find them in his room. They were not, however, and only by the help of a tearful little Cornish maiden at whom all the racketty job servants from London were swearing profusely as she fled about trying to do everything at once, did he discover his suit-case in the servants' hall, where two lordly *chauffeurs* accosted him scornfully as some one's belated valet. He escaped from them—and from the cook who, solemnly drunk, was using inconceivable language to the *entrée* she was dishing up—only to find that his man had forgotten to put the studs in his shirt. Whereupon he also cursed as he broke his finger-nails over the job. And yet all the time at the back of his brain, the thought of Aura lingered, and in the front of it his uncle's face, so foolishly, childishly, helplessly wanting money.

What else had the old man expected but chicanery when he dabbled in the Pool. It was nothing but a clutching whirlpool of hands trying to grasp at a golden sovereign in the centre! Every one clutched, he as much as any one. Then with a jar, his mind reverted to the shade of many a tree he had seen in India, where men lived, and apparently lived happily, possessed of nothing but their souls, devoid of all things save the inevitable garment of flesh.

The shade of a Bo-tree!

This certainly was not it, he thought, as with a smiling apology he slipped into the empty place and found himself in the battle-ground of a heated discussion.

A trifle dazzling surely, these lights and flowers and fair women. Helen looked well in white at the head of the table between Mr. Hirsch and Dr. Ramsay; and, thank Heaven! she had left off weepers in the evening. What a difference there was between lace and stiff crimped muslin; and how young she looked.

The rapidity of thought is immeasurable, the velocity of its vibration untranslatable in terms of mere human flesh and blood. These thoughts and millions of others suggested by the whole *entourage* which in a second became part of Ned Blackborough's life-experience, passed into his mind and left him free at once to listen to his cousin's gay—

"Here's Ned! I'll appeal to him! Do you think it fair that we women shouldn't have votes?"

"We shall have to settle our terminology first, Helen," he replied in the same tone. "What is fair? I presume what Mrs. Tressilian considers to be right."

"*That* isn't fair if you like," she retorted. "Fair is"—she paused.

"Exactly so!" laughed Peter Ramsay. "Is there an outside standard or is there not? That is the question."

Mr. Hirsch, who always wore white waistcoats in the evening (they were not so becoming as black ones) answered it.

"Of course there is a standard—the general consensus of opinion."

"Made up of units?" suggested Dr. Ramsay.

"Quite so!" retorted the financier, "but it gives the limit of safety. Between certain lines you can negotiate—even on the Stock Exchange, ha, ha!" His laugh was curiously explosive and shook him from head to foot.

"But surely there *is* a standard," said Helen softly.

"There is a standard which, collectively, we accept,

Helen. It comes back in the end to our personal verdict, I'm afraid," said her cousin, " and it is curious how that verdict varies," he continued addressing Mr. Hirsch. " You, I expect, believe in the law of supply and demand. Now, I feel, somehow, that if I were to charge a thousand pounds for a glass of water which a distracted husband wanted for his dying wife, I should be doing a detestably mean thing, even though the man was quite willing and able to pay for it." There was a pause.

" That is rather a stiff example," said Ted Cruttenden; " but theoretically, a man surely has the right to get the best price he can for his wares; without that axiom commerce would come to an end."

" What would the world be without it, I wonder?" remarked Dr. Ramsay. " Supposing it was made penal for any one to take more than ten per cent. profit——"

" I should be a pauper," laughed Mr. Hirsch, his bright eyes dancing. " That would not suit me at all. Why, I should have nothing over to give away, and my charities cover my sins. Imagine it, a world where there was no *' coup,'* where your brains were of no use to you. Pah!" He poured himself out a glass of water abstractedly, and drank it as if to take away the taste.

He was in great form that night, the rebuff of Helen's refusal to drive home with him having acted on his abundant vitality much as the attempt of a rival on the Stock Exchange to limit his freedom of action would have done, that is, it stimulated his determination to do as he chose.

And the others seemed in high spirits also, so that even Ned forgot the very existence of the Seaview Hotel, until some one said laughingly that there must be electricity in the air, or magnetism, or hypnotism, and suggested a *séance* of some kind.

" No," cried Lady Wrexham, who posed as being well in with the Psychical Research Society. " Let us crystal gaze—or stay, a magic mirror. Only a little ink in the palm of the hand, Mrs. Tresillian. It so often comes off

when I'm in the room, and I'm sure you could 'scry,' I see it in your eyes.''

Helen's caught Dr. Ramsay's instantly, almost resentfully, but he was silent.

'' Perhaps I'm a witch also, who knows? '' she said, speaking at him. '' Old Betty Cam was an ancestress of ours, wasn't she, father? and she was the devil's own warlock. But you shan't be disappointed, Lady Wrexham. There is a real magical crystal that came from Thibet somewhere in the house. I will find it for you to-morrow, or rather to-day, for it is past twelve o'clock. Time for every one who isn't a witch to be in her bed, surely.''

There was a decision about the remark which would not be gainsaid, so the ladies, some with, some without lights, dawdled upstairs like wise and foolish virgins, calling down jokes and good-nights to the men on their way to the billiard-room, while Ned Blackborough, seizing his opportunity, waylaid Mr. Hirsch and begged for five minutes in Sir Geoffrey's den.

'' About the hotel,'' echoed Mr. Hirsch when Ned broached the subject. '' *Pardon!* But excuse me if I change my cigarette for a cigar. There is always so much to be said concerning that business.''

He spoke with a smile, but his face had hardened at once, and Ned, listening, could not but admire his companion's uncompromising directness. He was aware of course, he said, that the money Sir Geoffrey had invested was a loan from Lord Blackborough, and therefore he treated him, as a shareholder, a large shareholder, with absolute freedom.

Well! Mr. Hirsch had found Sir Geoffrey in difficulties, and had helped him. Why? Because, having a great *penchant* for Mrs. Tressilian, he was glad to be of use. The hotel would practically have to be rebuilt. At present its condition would disgrace a jerry-built villa near London. And they had perpetrated this inconceivable sham in full face of the Atlantic.

But it was always the way when such schemes were not properly floated at first. There never was enough

money to allow for the inevitable leakage. Then little men had little ways, and the methods of a tuppenny-ha' penny ring, like this had been, were simply horrible.

But the site was gigantic, absolutely gigantic, and if you could only get rid of that bloated mechanic Jenkin and his gang, you could make anything of it. But they were incurably vulgar—they had wanted a gramaphone in the hall, they allowed one in the steward's room.

The words reminded Ned that, as he walked up to the hotel, lost in admiration of that marvellous sea surging against the sheer cliff, he had been greeted by shrieks of laughter and the sound of a double shuffle done to the latest music hall "catch on." And he smiled. Hirsch was right. It was incurably vulgar. Who was it who said that, since nowadays he had to choose between solitude and vulgarity, he chose the former?

Mr. Hirsch's cigar had actually gone out in his irritation, but he was alight again and went on.

Regarding the insurance? Yes. He had made a temporary arrangement to secure his own money and Sir Geoffrey's, and a little over; you could secure anything nowadays by a high enough premium. In fact, the best thing that could happen now, if he might be excused for saying so, was—was a fresh start—without Jenkin! The hotel would practically have to be rebuilt anyhow at the end of the season. Meanwhile, regarding the electric light. It was bad—that was Jenkin again—but they were exercising extreme care, and could do no more.

"But supposing," began Ned.

"My dear Lord Blackborough," said Mr. Hirsch, with a curious smile as he arose and pulled down his white waistcoat, "I never deal in suppositions. As a business man, I can't afford it. I know this has been worrying Sir Geoffrey, who has old-fashioned ideas of responsibility, but—ah! here he comes. I was just saying, sir, how disturbed you were this morning about the slight alarm at the Seaview last night. But, as I told you, it really lessens the odds of its occurring again. To make any fuss just at present, when you need to get all the

money you can in order to start the thing fair, would be suicidal. I don't, in fact, see that we are bound to do any more than we are doing. There is a certain risk in all large buildings as badly supplied with water as this one is. But surely one must credit people with eyes. *Caveat Emptor!* Lord Blackborough, *Caveat Emptor!* That immoral but comfortable piece of wisdom is the backbone of all reasonable speculation. Good-night. If I may, I'll have some whisky and water in the billiard room on my way upstairs."

Ned came back from the door and looked at his uncle.

"Well, sir," he said, "what is to be done?"

Sir Geoffrey's face was a study of irresolution. "Let's leave it till to-morrow, Ned," he said at last; "the night will bring wisdom. But I expect Hirsch is right. He has a wonderfully clear head; and I only wish that Helen——"

"I would leave Helen out of the business if I were you, sir," interrupted Ned angrily.

It was intolerable to think of her as possible part payment. As he lit his candle and made his way to the old wing, "among the ruins," as she called it, he told himself that he had half a mind to buy out all other interests and spend an extra thousand or two in throwing the whole gim-crack building over the cliffs. And it was all so useless! Helen didn't want the money; she was craving to live on an hospital nurse's pay.

"Ned," said a voice at the door, just as he had taken off his coat, "let me in, please, I must see you."

It was Helen herself. Her eyes were blazing bright, her face was pale. She had flung a white shawl over her bare shoulders, yet she shivered.

"Ned," she said swiftly, "thank God you're here! You must come with me—you will, won't you? Put on your thick shoes and come as you are. It is quite warm—there is only a fog."

"Come," he echoed, "come where?"

She seemed a trifle confused, and passed her hand over her forehead.

"Down to the point, of course; they must be warned——"

"Warned of what? What have you heard?"

"I didn't hear, I saw. Ah! do come quick, I ought to be there, you know, showing a light."

She spoke in curiously even tones, and for an instant Ned thought she was sleep-walking or dreaming. One of those deadly dreams of excessive hurry in which, no matter what you do, thought leaves the labouring body far behind.

"You saw it! But where, and what?"

She was silent for a second, looking at him half-dazed, then she spoke quite naturally. "It was in the crystal—the one they brought from Thibet. He said I could, and so I saw——"

Suddenly her whole bearing changed.

"Fire! fire! fire!" The cry, loud and clear, came as she turned and fled, he after her down the dark passage, led by the glimmer of her white gown.

Had she gone mad, or had she really seen something?

There was a little outside door, once the postern gate of the old Keep, which opened at the angle of the wing and the main part of the house. He followed her through that, losing her almost immediately in the dense white fog which clung to the damp walls. The windows of Sir Geoffrey's study were open, and as he ran past them, following the path, he heard something which sent the blood in a wild leap through his veins. It was a furious insistent ringing of the telephone call bell, which Sir Geoffrey, in his first delight with his new toy on the point, had put in so that he might be constantly in touch with the workmen.

Then something *was* wrong. What? As he spurted ahead towards Helen's ghost-like figure seen in the clearer atmosphere beyond, he asked himself how she could have known.

"Where are you going?" he called breathlessly, "that isn't the way to the hotel."

She turned for a moment, then ran on, her voice com-

ing back to him, "It is the light—the light on Betty Cam's chair—the light for the ship."

"Helen! Helen! go back, what good can you do? Let me go and see," he called, striving desperately to overtake her; but she was as swift as a hare, and so dimly seen, too, dodging about among those huge boulders. And everywhere the sea-fog hung thick. "Helen! Helen!" His cry came back to him, but no other sound did he hear save the rising roar of the waves as he neared the cliff.

Right ahead of him rose Betty Cam's chair. Well! if she was going there he would catch her up then; and he would see—yes! he would see from there if anything was wrong.

For a moment he saw her above him,—on the sky-line was it? And, if so, why was the sky so clear? Was there a glow? Great God! there was! a glow in the sky and at her feet.

"Helen! Helen!" he cried as he sped on. "Tell me, what is it?"

There was no answer, but the next instant he had gained the crest, and could see. It was fire, but fire seen through fog. The strangest sight—a huge vignette, a magic-lantern slide, sharp in the centre, fading to an aureole. Close as they were, he could see nothing save dim shadows in the blaze of light.

"The ship! the ship! It is coming so fast—oh! so fast," said a monotonous voice beside him. Helen—Good God! how ill she looked, all unlike herself—was seated on Betty Cam's chair, pointing with her right hand far out to sea.

"Nell!" he said swiftly, "Come! I can't leave you here, and I must get down at once, the road's just below us, they will need all the help——"

As he spoke he knew some was coming, for a live spark showed swift curving through the white fog where the road should be, racing like a great fuse to the heart of a mine. It must be a motor—Hirsch's most likely—Thank Heaven he was at least a man of action! Yes, that was

his voice coming back as the light flashed, raced, disappeared.

"For God's sake, be calm, sir, we've done all we could, we'll do all we can!"

Not true! not true! except the last. "Helen!" he cried roughly, "your father—come!"

Did she smile? He did not wait to make certain, but leaving her, dashed down the hill. Halfway he turned doubtfully, hoping she had followed him; but, already almost lost in the mist, he saw the lonely figure with the faint glow about it still seated on Betty Cam's chair.

As he dashed on again a curious shuddering boom rolled through the fog. He wondered vaguely what it was, but his whole mind was set on that nebulous circle of flaming light. He was nearer now, the vignetting grew sharper, towers and balconies began to loom luridly, beset by tongues of flame. It must be all on fire—a wide sweep from end to end.

Again that shuddering boom—what was it? My God! Could Helen be right again, and was it a ship in distress? As he ran, he counted ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, fifty-five, sixty. A ship! a ship, indeed! Was there to be no ending or horrors? He was on the upward rise now. The aureole had gone. He could see the flames leaping while the crowd stood still.

A large crowd, thank God! so they must be all out surely!

He met a man running back, calling as he ran, "A ship in distress on the rocks—the life-boat—more help needed there, come!"

"Are they all out?" he shouted, and the man nodded as he ran.

A relief, indeed!

He slackened speed, as more fisher-folk ran past him back to *their* work, *their* trade.

All out! my God! what a relief! No! by Heaven! There was a sudden stir in the crowd, and high upon the furthermost seaword balcony, as yet untouched by the

flames, a little white figure showed bending over the balustrade, and calling to some one below.

The answer reached him, making him leap forward—

"All right, little lady! I'm coming!"

There was a struggle ahead of him, a tall figure breaking loose from hands that would have held it back; and then his uncle——

"For God's sake," he shouted as he ran—"think of Helen!"

The voice arrested Sir Geoffrey for a second, and Ned never forgot the look of that scared, kindly, distraught face he saw for a moment.

"I am thinking of her," came the answer. Then the pause ended.

Ned was after him without a moment's consideration; life seemed so small a thing to him that he could not stop to think of it; but Ted Cruttenden sprang forward, also, to hold him back. The Fates did that, however, for as he would have plunged into the burning house, the upper hinge of one of the wide hall doors gave way, and as it swung inwards with a crash, just touched Ned's forearm, and snapped it like a bulrush.

As he staggered, Ted had hold of him. "You can't," he said. "He knows every turn, and may do it yet if the stairs stand. It's madness for you. And my God! there's Mrs. Tresillian. Why did they let her come? we didn't tell her on purpose——"

Ned, dazed with a pain he had hardly located, had only time to wonder stupidly how she had managed to change her dress—she wore a coat and skirt—before she was beside him clinging to his unhurt arm.

"Father!" she said. "Ned, where is father?"

He shook his head. "Doing his duty, I suppose," he muttered; "I tried to follow, but got hurt. Try to keep calm if you can, Nell, there's a chance still."

Yes! a chance, if the fire-proof stairs were fire-proof. She stood quiet, silent; only once he heard her say to herself, "Why did I wait—oh! why didn't I come at once?"

So the minutes passed, and the crowds of Camhaven fisherfolk giving up hope of more excitement here to-night, sought it elsewhere, though already a murmur had come out of the fog that there was no immediate danger; a big ship was on the sunken rocks, and had established communication with the shore. That was all.

And still the minutes passed, and Ned stood holding Helen's hand in his.

Yet there was no sign of returning feet upon the fire-proof stair.

A little breeze springing up had drifted the smoke south-west, obscuring the balcony so they could see nothing.

Those who knew her began to look at her with pitying eyes. Then in an instant something in which all else was forgotten—a sharp sound like the crack of a rifle, a quick upburst of sparks, then a great crash, and for a few moments silence and darkness.

The roof had fallen in.

"I'll take her home, Lord Blackborough," said Peter Ramsay, for all her height lifting her easily. "You will be wanted here. Mr. Hirsch, I may use your motor?"

"Broken," replied Mr. Hirsch, who was as white as a sheet, the tears almost running down his cheeks. "I drove it myself, and I didn't understand, but the Wrexham's is here. My God! what a frightful thing—*shrecklich*! *schrecklich*!" His voice shook; these things were not in the bond.

Yet one bond had been kept, for in an hour's time, when the flames had eaten their full of the frail thing which had dared to usurp Cam's point, they found Sir Geoffrey half-way down the stair caught in a trap between two gaps in what had been scheduled as a fire-proof staircase.

He held the child in his arms, her head, wrapped in his coat to preserve her from the smoke, nestled close upon his breast.

"For ever never an-naye!" That promise anyhow had been kept as a Pentreath should have kept it!

CHAPTER VII

EARLY dawn in a house where the new-dead lie unheeding whether it be darkness or day. Dawn when those who have seen the light of life fade from a beloved face watch the slow sunlight steal once more over the edge of the world, and claim all things for its own.

Yet watching alone, how peaceful such a dawn may be, when one can face death, not as a thing apart, but as a part of life; when there is no need to cloud its kindly form with sentimentalities, when we need not drug ourselves into disregarding its dignity by some narcotic of belief in life to come, when it is enough to feel that this life has passed where all life goes.

In the old Keep, however, where the master lay dead in his study among his fishing-rods and guns, as they had left him till the inquest should be over, there was no one near enough to the dead man so to watch, for Helen was still unconscious in her room upstairs. Dr. Ramsay, whose hands were full with many claimants on his care, spoke of a severe nervous crisis, which had evidently been coming on for some time. Her best chance was this semi-cataleptic state from which she would recover in her own good time. So she lay in her simple white room, on her simple little bed, and the dawn stole in slowly through the open window bringing the day-spring song of birds with it. But she was not there. She might have been with her father for all the by-standers could tell.

Ned, his face drawn with pain from the fractured arm over which Dr. Ramsay had instantly looked severe, but for which Ned refused to lay himself up absolutely until certain necessary details had been arranged, looked in

and envied her. He had told the doctor of her visit to his room, and his wild stern-chase of her to Betty Cam's chair, and of his wonder—a wonder that grew as he thought over it—as to how she could possibly have got home, changed her dress and come on in the Wrexham's motor in so short a space of time. Still she had done it.

Evidently she had done it, the doctor had replied guardedly, and there, in the stress of many calls, the subject had dropped.

And yet as Ned went about giving orders in hopes of lessening anxieties and distress, he was remembering the strange unkenned look he had noticed on his cousin's face. Was it possible that—No! it was impossible. Anyhow he had no time to think it over as yet.

The roll-call of inmates had, thank Heaven! been on the whole satisfactory. Only two had failed to answer. Mrs. Massingham and, curiously enough, his friend Charteris, who had arranged to leave the next morning when his attack of Indian fever should have passed away. The only man who knew of the danger! It was a coincidence certainly. As for Mrs. Massingham, the fright must have brought on one of her heart attacks; else there was no reason why she should not have escaped, taking Maidie with her; it had not been a good life anyhow. But what an awful home-coming for the husband! He might arrive that very day, but it would be better if he did not. Not for a few days, till the whole thing, body and soul alike, should have gone out of ken for ever.

Then there was the ship. It was a transport from India, a bit out of its course through having damaged an engine. It had mistaken the fire for the lighthouse further west, and had struck lightly on a sunken rock just off the headland beyond Cam's Bay. It seemed none the worse, and would most likely float off in the next tide or two as the wind strengthened. In the meantime that would entail another funeral, as they had had a death on board that night.

So much Mr. Hirsch told Ned, when the latter went to see him about wiring to the office of the new company.

"I've looked to that," he replied curtly, "and I must get all these" (a perfect pile of forms lay beside him) "off at once; only the nuisance is my motor is damaged."

"Ted Cruttenden is cycling with mine," began Ned.

Mr. Hirsch looked up quickly—"You will be careful, won't you?"

"I won't foul my own nest more than I can help," said Ned bitterly.

"That's right! And you know——" Mr. Hirsch was still writing hurriedly—"I don't believe it was the wires at all. It certainly began in the back premises, and they tell me the cook was dead drunk after dinner, and half the servants as well—they were dancing break-downs to the gramaphone."

"That doesn't take away the taste," burst out Ned passionately, "or take away the responsibility for having put such a ghastly monstrosity on that point, before that sea, under the stars of heaven——"

Mr. Hirsch looked up with the surprised kindly look an elder gives to a child who has suddenly burst out crying over a broken toy.

"You really ought to go to bed, Lord Blackborough," he said. "All this is so exhausting to the nerves. I shall do so, when I have sent off my telegrams."

Was it the roll of the double r which made Ned inclined to kick Mr. Hirsch? It was a relief when Ted Cruttenden ended the conversation by entering in the silent, unobtrusive way, which people adopt in the house of mourning.

"Messages ready?" he asked.

"Mine are! Mr. Hirsch has some. I suppose you wanted to be off, It's a shocking bad road to Haverton," remarked Ned, full of ill-humour as he left the room.

"I shall not go to Haverton though," said Ted. "I shall save time by cycling to Wellhampton. Five miles further, but there's an all-night office, and it seems a pity to waste time till eight o'clock."

"Good," nodded Mr. Hirsch, "though——" here he

gave one of his short explosive laughs—"I am in no particular hurry. I must give Jenkin time—good Lord, what a relief to get rid of Jenkin—ahem!" He pulled himself up hurriedly and went on writing.

It was the first time Ted had come to close quarters with a millionaire, a millionaire too of European reputation as a financier more than as mere money seeker, and the effect was stimulating. It roused his admiration, his imagination. He stood at the window, waiting and watching Mr. Hirsch's head—it was growing, in truth, a trifle bald at the crown—as it bent over his papers and thinking what it must feel like to possess the art of transmuting baser things to gold.

"I will give you a sovereign," began the great man condescendingly. "One is in cipher, and that costs. The change in stamps, if you please. I have many letters to write."

Typical of the man, thought Ted Cruttenden, while Mr. Hirsch, noticing how careful the young man was in discriminating between his and Lord Blackborough's telegrams, but putting them into different pockets, smiled. "You are metodical, I see," he remarked, with just that faint slur over the th which occasionally told he was not English. "It is a great gift in business."

Ted smiled also, and flushed with pleasure, since Mr. Hirsch's praise was worth having; and so, then and there, almost as if some chemical affinity had manifested itself between the molecules composing his brain and Mr. Hirsch's, he made up his mind to try and follow his example. He was no fool; other people succeeded, why not he?

As he rode off his mind was full of this new determination. And yet, one short week ago he had thought himself uncommonly lucky to have pushed himself so far up the ladder as to be in receipt of a hundred and fifty pounds a year. For it must not be forgotten that he was no-man's son. His mother had refused to give his father's name. When she lay dying, and her people, seeking to trick her, asked what name the child should

be called, she had smiled derisively at them. "Edward Cruttenden, of course," had been her reply, the latter being her own name, a common enough one in the Black Country.

Ted had thought all this out many times; yet it came back to him—with no rancour against his mother, but a good deal against his unknown father. On this fine June morning as he made his way across the high Cornish tableland, dipping down—with both brakes on—into some steep combe and thereinafter climbing out of it again, pushing his bicycle.

If he had only begun earlier to think about making money, he would have had a better chance with Aura. No doubt at his age Hirsch had been operating on the Exchange and promoting companies.

Promoting! Operating! These were words indeed!

But it must be uphill work—so was this last combe; for it was to be one of those hot June days, when the freshness of dawn is gone in half an hour, and the very grass has no trace of dew on it.

He sat down at the top of the hill and drew out his handkerchief in order to mop his face.

In doing so one of Mr. Hirsch's telegrams came out also and fluttered to the ground.

It was the one in cipher, and, as he glanced at it, he found that by a pure chance he knew it, or something very like it. His little friend and admirer in the stock-broker's office was an expert in ciphers, and had shown him several. This—one of the easiest—amongst the number.

He could not choose but read the first word,

"Buy."

Buy! That was curious. He should have expected it to be "sell."

Buy what?

Buy Sea-views all below five shillings. Hirsch.

He sat looking at the words for some time, puzzled, then rode on, his mind busy with the problem; but the puzzle remained until, as he was going into the telegraph

office at Wellhampton, he met Mr. Jenkin coming out. Then the memory of Mr. Hirsch's laugh of relief at "getting rid of Jenkin," which he had hardly noticed at the time, came back to him. Jenkin apparently was to be given time to sell, while Mr. Hirsch was to buy. It was a straight lead-over. What if he were to follow it even to the extent of but a hundred pounds? His heart gave a great throb; he felt as a man might, when put on a horse for the first time and the reins given into his hand. Who was to prevent him going where he chose—except, of course, the horse!

He returned to the Keep by breakfast time, but for a wonder he had no appetite, since he was of that healthy strong-nerved sort to whom even personal sorrow comes as an expenditure of force which requires recuperation. And there was no personal feeling in this tragedy except for Blackborough's share in it; for that he was unfeignedly sorry. He, however, had been finally ordered to his room by Dr. Ramsay who was too busy to speak to any one. The Wrexhams left early, followed at intervals by the other guests, and the Keep settled down into the slack collapse which always follows on the excitement of a catastrophe. The servants seemed to remember they had been up all night; Mr. Hirsch was the only person who was really awake, but Ted did not somehow care to see Mr. Hirsch; though as the day wore on and the latter went off once more to Cam's point, Ted took down some telegrams which had come for him, and watched him read them anxiously. They seemed satisfactory, but by this time Ted was telling himself he had behaved like a fool in sending that wire to his friend on the Stock Exchange.

The desolation on the point, where workmen were still searching for any traces of Mr. Charteris' body, made him still more depressed, so he strolled over to Camshaven, thereby letting himself in for additional dreariness; since, just as he abutted on the little quay, he saw one of the transport's boats, disembarking a coffin. The dead officer, of course. Poor chap, to die like that within

sight of home was rough luck. He stood with bared head watching the guard of honour form up and prepare to take the body to the church, where it was to lie until directions came by wire from the relatives.

"You don't happen to know the name?" he asked of the local pilot who was close beside him.

"Not for sure, sir," he replied, "tho' I did hear'm say Massin'ham; same name as the poor madam they people burnt in her bed las' night."

"Massingham!" echoed Ted—"that is very curious."

It was. Indeed, Mr. Hirsch, coming back to the Keep half an hour afterwards, was quite pale, and called for a whisky-and-soda before he could explain to Dr. Ramsay the extraordinary coincidence of Major Massingham's body being brought in for burial to Camshaven, where those of his poor wife and child already awaited him as it were. But he, Mr. Hirsch, had seen the captain of the transport, and everything was quite simple—terribly simple. Major Massingham had come on board at Bombay ill, but had not, however, let his people know of his illness, as he expected the voyage to set him up. He had unfortunately taken a chill off Gibraltar: pneumonia had set in, and in his delirium he had constantly talked of his wife and child, and begged not to be buried at sea. The latter idea had been quite an obsession with him; almost the last words he spoke being "Not at sea—not at sea!" That had been two hours before the ship struck, and when they discovered there was no danger, it had seemed another curious coincidence to ensure poor Massingham's wish. But the whole affair was . . .

Here Mr. Hirsch became quite unintelligible in his admixture of English and German.

"It is certainly—curious," assented Dr. Ramsay thoughtfully; "very curious. But it is just as well he should come home dead—the news would have broken him. By the way, I don't want Lord Blackborough disturbed. There is a nasty splinter that will give trouble; and he was in such pain, I ordered a sleeping-draught.

Indeed——" Here he smiled. "I am thinking of a sleep myself till dinner time."

"I also," yawned Mr. Hirsch. "Mein Gott! Tragedy is fatiguing off the stage as well as on it, and this poor Major Massingham . . . *Himmel! es ist un-be-greiflich-auf-erlegbar!*" And he went off to his room, looking a perfect wreck, aged by ten years; for deep down below the hard shell which grubbing for gold requires, his heart was soft. And these things were uncomfortable—they were not in the bond—they belonged to a spiritual life in which he had no part.

They weighed heavily on Ted Cruttenden also, for he had the Englishman's innate antagonism to anything which hints at the unknown, anything which might suggest a wider outlook than the one he already possesses. But the hundred pounds he had adventured, following Mr. Hirsch's lead, weighed on him still more heavily. Why had he been so impulsive? At the most he could gain three hundred; and what would Mr. Hirsch say if it were to come out? Not that it mattered, since he was not likely to see much more of Mr. Hirsch, for he must go back to Blackborough next morning. So, after a time, he also sought his room and a rest.

Dr. Ramsay, however, was deprived of his; for, looking in while passing to see how Lord Blackborough fared, he found him not only wide awake, but greatly excited by the news which a servant had brought him.

"Curse the fool!" said Peter Ramsay vexedly. "I made sure you would be asleep. Yes! it is extremely curious, but——"

"What does it mean, doctor—that's what I want to know," burst in Ned. "What is it, this strange something which every now and again seems to show us a solemn, shrouded face, and then disappears in mocking, devilish laughter—in charlatans' tricks?"

Dr. Ramsay shook his head. "If I could tell you that, Lord Blackborough, I—well! For one thing, I should be the richest man in the world. All we doctors can say is that there is something—something which can

be explained away if one chooses to explain it away. But the explanation isn't scientific. It is easy to say a man is mad because he believes himself to be the Emperor of China, but what about the question, 'Why does a man think he is the Emperor of China when he is mad?' We have got to answer that, and show what it is which induces delusions and hysteria, and why hypnotic sleep causes certain specific alterations in the body corporate, as it does. But we've only just woke up to the fact that we stand on the verge of some great discovery; we've only just begun to question the nerve centres, and see the incalculable power of suggestion. Now take this case of your cousin's," he continued eagerly. "Whatever it may or may not be, it is certain that I suggested to her first that she was mentally unstable; second, that she might be able to project herself . . . then Lady Wrexham slips in with her crystal-gazing suggestion—and—and the thing is done."

"There is something else," said Ned slowly, almost reluctantly, "which might—we were talking of old Betty Cam in the morning—she and I—and I told her it wasn't safe for her to be always watching the sea—I warned her—in joke of course—of her hereditary——" Here he broke off impatiently. "But it is of no use talking—the thing is frankly—impossible."

"Hardly that," remarked Dr. Ramsay dryly. "We have to learn, apparently, that many things are possible—at times."

Ned looked at him curiously. "One wouldn't credit you with such beliefs, Ramsay," he said.

"I don't credit them myself," replied the doctor shortly. "Personally I wish these phenomena didn't exist. They complicate the equation of life tremendously. But they are there. It is no use dismissing them as hysterical manifestations. That only alters the title of the problem, and we have to refer to the phenomena again under the heading 'What is hysteria?'"

"Of one thing I am certain," remarked Ned suddenly, with conviction: "it was not Helen altogether, as she is

now, whom I left in Betty Cam's chair last night. I have been going over the whole incident in my mind, and I am conscious of having had a sense all through that there was something unkenned, something not quite real——"

"The question is," put in Dr. Ramsay, "how much she will remember when she wakes, and that cannot be very long now, for she was much more normal when I went in to see her last, two hours ago. I shall look in again as I go upstairs."

"I hope she will remember nothing," said Ned quickly.

Peter Ramsay shook his head. "It may be everything; you cannot possibly tell——" he broke off as a knock was heard at the door, and a voice said, "May I come in?" "My God!" he continued, "there she is!"

It was indeed Helen who, entering as he held open the door, passed swiftly to her cousin's side.

"Poor Ned!" she said, her face, on which showed the marks of recent tears, full of a grateful, affectionate solicitude. "How foolish it has been of me to leave you to bear the brunt of it all; but I am all right now, and shall manage. He ought to be in bed, oughtn't he?" she continued, her eyes narrowing a little as they met Peter Ramsay's, her whole expression showing for an instant a half-puzzled pain, as if she sought for some memory of past trouble. "I am sure you think so—don't you?"

"I think so very much indeed, Mrs. Tressilian," he replied. "Your cousin's arm——"

"Poor arm!" she interrupted softly, "that was broken before I came down—I was asleep, I suppose, when they called me—it seems so strange that I could have slept, and I seem to have forgotten everything except the awful suspense; then the awful night on the point— but—but you couldn't have saved him, Ned. It was the stairs—if only they had been fireproof!—for he knew every turn. I—I have been down to see him, Ned, and he looks so peaceful—so content. You see he had

done all he could—all a Pentreath should have done—so—so it is best. And now, dear, you really must go to bed. I can manage nicely. I will send to meet the Massinghams—poor souls!—how terribly sad, and how inexplicable it all is!"

Inexplicable indeed! They looked at each other silently.

She evidently knew all that they knew, but of what they did not know she also knew nothing. The interval between the time when she had passed upstairs to her room, joking and laughing with the others, and her first sight of the halo of fire had simply lapsed into a great suspense.

It was as well, Dr. Ramsay admitted to himself, and yet he felt annoyed. For, looking at Helen Tressilian's face, he recognised that his chance—and the chance of science was over.

In all probability that would be her one solitary intrusion into the unknown dimension which whetted his curiosity so much. She was normal now; she might conceivably marry some deserving idiot, and settle down to half a dozen children. She might even become a nurse!

All things were possible to the calm self-possession with which she insisted on rest for them both. So, in an evil temper, he followed her advice.

Meanwhile Ted Cruttenden, after wandering about aimlessly, uncertain whether to bless or curse himself for his morning's work, had also sought rest, and was asleep dreaming of Aura. Aura, as he had seen her in her blue linen smock and sandals, Aura as he could picture her in pink satin and diamonds. Which was the most beautiful, the most beautified? He scarcely knew. When he felt inclined to bless himself, it was because he could picture her in the latter; when curses came it was because he regretted the former.

So to him in troubled slumber, came a knock at the door.

"Come in," he called drowsily; then sat up with beating heart on the edge of his bed, feeling for his slippers

with his feet. He did not know that the dapper little figure at the door was to him Mephistopheles, that he was about to sell his soul to the devil; but he was vaguely conscious of an approaching crisis in his life.

"*Soh!* my young friend, you have bought Sea View shares! Why?"

The room was growing dark. There was a wide interval of shadowy light from the windows between the young man as, having found mental and bodily foothold, he stood coatless, defiant, as if prepared to fight Fate, and Mr. Hirsch decently robed for dinner, and with, as ever, the large white flower of a blameless life in his button-hole. Through the open window the mellow pipe of a blackbird, full of the glad song of wood and dale, forced its way insistently. The memory of it lingered with Ted always. In after years that joyous invitation to the wilds always seemed to sound in his ears whenever a question of choice arose.

Now, though he heard it, he was too busy to heed it.

"Why?" he echoed. "I bought them, sir—because I—I believed in you . . . there you have it in a nutshell."

"And why did you believe in me?"

Ted, having recovered his confidence, gave a short laugh. "Upon my soul, I don't know. I did it—that's all."

"Then you had no private intimation—you had not overheard anything—you—it was *unvertraute gut*—no more?"

"You gave me a lead over yourself, you know," replied Ted argumentatively. "You said Jenkin must have time—and the rest followed—I couldn't help knowing the cipher, could I?"

A faint chuckle came from the gloom by the door. "*Soh!* you have prains! Mr. Cruttenden, I ought to be angry, I ought to tell you many things, but I have searched long for one to believe in me. I need him. Let this be—you have won three hundred pounds. I give you this per year as my clerk. You accept?

It was all over in a moment. The blackbird ceased his song, and as Ted Cruttenden hurriedly dressed for dinner his head was in a whirl. This was a chance indeed. By Christmas he might stand on more equal ground. And after Christmas? His fancy ran riot in pink satin and diamonds.

But, when he left with Mr. Hirsch next morning, the latter was in a towering bad temper. Lord Blackborough was a fool. He had refused to listen to reason, and Mrs. Tressilian was no better. They had both of them declined to be mixed up any further with the hotel, and would not even let him buy them out. The insurance had no doubt been made in accordance with business principles, but——

"He will divest himself of every farthing in two years if he goes on being so *verdammlich gerecht*. Yes! I give him two years to be a pauper," said poor Mr. Hirsch, and then his eyes positively filled with tears as he considered how all his efforts to secure a competency for Helen had failed.

CHAPTER VIII

It was early autumn, and Aura was standing in the garden, looking more like a Botticelli angel than ever, for her face was mutinous, the very curls about her temples and ears all crisped and gold-edged as she defied even the sunlight.

She was engaged in an argument with Martha, who, in Mr. Sylvanus Smith's brief yearly absences on the work of the Socialistic Congress, still attempted an authority which she had once held undisputed.

"Well, I wouldn't, not if it was ever so," asserted the worthy woman, her face aflame with righteous indignation. "Mr. Meredith, the rector, he know his part, an' being unbaptized there won't be no funeral, so what's the use of flowers?"

Aura's eyebrows almost met in a sudden frown. "You don't mean that they will refuse——"

"I don't know nothin', Miss H'Aura," interrupted Martha; "only what I hear tell. I don't 'old with baptism, nor yet with burials, specially the penny things they has hereabout. I don't want no halfpence to help bury me. I ain't like the folk nowadays, as is that restless they don't know where they'll lie, much less where they'll go to when they're dead. But I do hear it said that there'll be a fuss, becos the Calvinists wouldn't baptize the babby, hoping to get hold o' the name o' the father, for it *was* a sin and a shame, her not bein', as it were, all there, an' now the rector'll object to a unbaptized, except in the odd corner where they puts the 'fellow deceased.' No, it ain't the sort of thing for you to be mixing yourself up with, Miss H'Aura. Them lovely

lilies'd be ashamed o' your taking them to that gurl Gwen.''

Aura bent her head caressingly to the great bunch of gold-rayed Japanese lilies she held.

'' I am taking them to a dead baby,'' she said quietly, '' the lilies won't be ashamed of it.''

And with that she turned on her heel superbly, leaving Martha speechless, to watch the blue linen smock cross the lawn and disappear behind the rhododendrons. A glimmer of it showed like a bit of heaven among the birchwood beyond the bridge ere the older woman found her tongue, and going over to where Adam was weeding beetroot confided in him.

'' You mark my word, Adam Bate,'' she said solemnly, '' Miss H'Aura '' (the *h* was always added on such occasions as a point of ceremony) '' 'll marry the wrong man, sure as eggs is eggs.''

Adam looked up aghast. '' The wrong 'un? Why, sakes me, she ain't got never one at all; and sorry be, for 'twud be a right sight to see 'un billin' and cooin' 'mongst the yapple trees, as true lovers shud.''

Martha's repressed indignation found instant outlet. '' Adam Bate,'' she remarked severely, '' you 'em's got a low depraved mind, that's what's the matter with you. Miss H'Aura ain't o' the cuddlin' sort, no, nor me neither, as you know to your cost, or shud do by this time. No! Miss H'Aura, bless her dear heart, has such a outlook as no man can ever reach to it truly; an' when one is a-lookin' down from a 'eight, it's hard to tell on what rung o' the ladder a feller's standing. There's always somethin' in the way o' right seein', either 'is body or 'is head, specially if it has good looks.''

'' Not if 'e be low 'nuff, Martha, woman,'' replied Adam, stooping closer to his beetroot, some of which seemed to get into his sunburnt ears. '' When she be so high as a star, and he be a creepin' wum in the yerth, an' there never cud be no count of bein' ekal——''

'' Then 'e'd better leave coortin' alone,'' interrupted Martha uncompromisingly, '' seein' 'e cud never clasp

her, try 'e ever so hard. But head or heart, you mark my word, when Miss H'Aura's time comes, him as cares least, an' lays least finger to her, is the one for that prize. An' there won't be no billin' and cooin' among your yapple trees, Mr. Bate—so there! ''

Adam stood looking after her admiringly. '' 'Twarn't so bad if it hadn't bin for that trick o' blushin'; but there, beet is beet, and what's in the hands comes out in the face. I'll tell her so when I gives it in fur bilin'.''

With which remark he chuckled, and settled down to his weeding once more. For fifteen years he had made ineffectual attempts to court Martha, and nothing now would have surprised or taken him aback more than the faintest success.

On her side, Martha kept up the conflict with external spirit, but with a certain sneaking admiration also for his pertinacity. As she went back to her kitchen she also chuckled. '' Blushed like a babby,'' she murmured, '' an' he wrinkled like a bad batch o' bread. I'll tell him that there beetroot's bled when he brings it in.''

Aura by this time was out of the woods and cresting the bracken-patched hillside, the silly Welsh sheep, alarmed even at her gracious presence, fleeing from the tussocks and rocks far ahead of her with grunts and whistles such as no other sheep in the world can make.

The lilies on her arm brought a passing sweetness into the fresh morning air, and as she carried them her thoughts were busy with what Martha had said to her. What did it all mean? Her arms, which in all their young and vigorous life had never held a child, closed tenderly round the flowers as if they had been the body of the dead baby. Poor little babe! to come into this world unsought, to leave it to be quarrelled over. The motherhood which was hers by right of her sex wakened in her strongly; she laid her soft cheek caressingly once more on a white petal, then, in sudden impulse, she kissed it softly. Poor little childie! But Gwen had loved it, and it had not minded being unbaptized. It had not even minded its fatherlessness. Neither had Gwen; but

then she, poor soul, was what people called wanting. Wanting in what? Not in motherhood, certainly.

Aura had often seen the two playing together on the sunny banks about the shepherd's cottage; the toddling baby with its fists full of its mother's curly hair, both faces aglow with laughter and with love.

And now the child was dead. Poor Gwen!

Aura, accustomed to look at Nature with clear eyes, and utterly untouched by conventional conclusions, felt a wellspring of sympathy rise up in her heart. Such a pretty baby, too, as it had been! More than once she had paused in passing to watch it and wish that she too had so delightful a plaything, thinking that with so abiding an interest in them, the hills and woods, the streams and flowers of her secluded valley would suffice for her life.

And now it was dead!

Her eyes, blurred with tears, made a misty halo round the cottage, tucked out of man's way in a little hollow among the hills. A desolate-looking little cottage, gardenless, fenceless, a mere human habitation set down beside a spouting spring, which day and night, night and day, splashed on in high-pitched, feeble, querulous iteration.

As she came up to it a black shadow showed on the doorstep, and, through the mist of her unshed tears, she recognised it as the figure of a man. It was, indeed, the Reverend Morris Pugh coming away from consolation. He paused at the sight of her, as any man well might, and over his keen Celtic face swept a wave of enthusiastic approval. His hat was off, his smile shone out brilliantly.

"Excuse me," he said, "I am the minister, and this is kind indeed; those beautiful lilies, they will surely comfort the poor mother, and teach her to trust in the mercy of Him who considers the flowers of the fields—it—it is a Christian act." There were almost tears in his voice.

Aura looked at him and smiled.

"But I am not a Christian. I brought them for the baby," she said simply.

Morris Pugh's eyes narrowed. "I am sorry; and they can do no good to the child. God has taken him. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay. Gwen has to learn her lesson, poor child."

"You mean,"—Aura's face had grown a little pale,—"that the child's death is—is a punishment?"

"It is done in love—the Lord loveth whom He chasteneth," he replied gently.

"And you have told her so?"

Something in the girl's tone made him reply on the instant: "She did not need the telling; she knew it already."

"She knew it already!"

Aura passed him like a flame of fire, and entered the cottage eager with her purely human consolation; but the note of preparation within struck a chill to her very soul.

Old Mrs. Evans, Gwen's mother, sat in a black dress with her Bible before her at the receipt of custom. The door between the living-room and the bedroom was half open, and through it, lying on a table covered with a white sheet, was a tiny, still, uncovered form in a white gown. Aura could see the little dimpled hands folded so sedately on the little breast; it sent a great pang through her to think of them so quiet.

And Gwen? What of her?

"I have brought these lilies," she said almost apologetically to stout Mrs. Evans; "I should like to give them to Gwen, if I may."

Mrs. Evans's English being of the smallest, she sighed, rose, and saying "Pliss you, come this way," ushered Aura with her armful of lilies into the bedroom. In the further corner of it, her apron over her face, sat Gwen rocking herself to and fro, and muttering under her breath. She drew down the apron at her mother's touch and quick sentence in Welsh, and so sat staring across the body of the dead baby at Aura. Her face was more vacant than distraught, its pink and white prettiness

seeming to hide the tragedy of grief which must surely lie beneath it.

"I have brought these," said Aura, laying one of the lilies beside the dead child.

With a cry, fierce as a wild animal, Gwen sprang to her feet, snatched at the flower, tore it shred from shred, and flung them to the corners of the room.

"Stand back, Englishwoman!" she cried in Welsh, her eyes blazing with sudden, wild, distracted passion. "Leave us alone! We are accursed! accursed! we want no flowers here." Then she clung to her mother and wailed, "Oh! mother, take it away—take the child away—I do not want it; it is accursed. God has taken it away, and it must go. Let her take it if she wants it; take it away and bury it out of sight. I must forget my sin—my sin—my sin! *Beth n'ai! Beth n'ai! Gwae fi! beth n'ai!*"

The mingled sobbing of the two women, roused in an instant to the very highest pitch of unrestrained emotion, smote on Aura's ears turning her to veritable stone. She understood enough to grasp the drift of what she heard, and with a quick pulse of pity for the quiet rest thus rudely disturbed, she bent and kissed the clay-cold child, then turned without a word and left the room. Not to be long alone, however.

The elder woman, recovering her self-control as quickly as she had lost it, followed her into the sunshine beyond the low door, and arrested her with mingled tears and apologies. Gwen, she said in quaintest English and Welsh, was a mad *iolin*—just a silly nonsense—though it was just true the child wass better to die. It was not as the 'nother one—here she looked sorrowfully at a five-year-old who was busy making mud pies by the water-spout, and shook her head—that one wass two shillin' and sixpence a week. Yess, indeed! because her daughter wass for ever in the good shentleman placiss; but Gwen—silly nonsense, Gwen—she could pay nothing. She was not all wise——

Aura, staring out into the sunshine which happed the

whole beautiful world-expanse of hill and wood in its magic mantle, looked in the woman's really grief-stricken face, in slow, almost incredulous wonder.

"You mean that—that—" she hesitated, pointing to the child—"that your other daughter in service pays you half a crown?"

Something in her voice made Mrs. Evans mop her eyes with her apron still more strenuously. "It is the price," she protested; "there is many askiss three shillin'. Mrs. Jhones and she have two, an' Mrs. Daviss, an'——"

"And Gwen gave nothing!"

The words seemed to Aura to burden the sunshine; she turned swiftly to go, feeling the need of escape.

"But the ladiess," sobbed Mrs. Evans, "would be given a shillings or so when they be comning. Yess, indeed! a shillings or so."

Aura wheeled, the lilies still in her arms. "I have no money," she cried, her voice ringing with passionate scorn, "I never have any money, thank God!"

So with quick, springing step, her whole young soul aflame with indignation, she was off breasting the hill, leaving the hollows behind her, wishing with all her heart that she could have carried the dead baby with her. To call it accursed! To count it unbaptized! The darling lying there so peaceful, so still, so waxen, so like the lilies. Ah! if she could only take it away from all the sordid thoughts, what burial would not her fingers compass there on the bosom of the kindly earth! For it and for the lilies. How soft it should lie, how flower-decked! Yes, the great white petals should shield the little white face from the touch of the close, damp earth, and it should sleep—sleep—sleep!

The tears ran down her cheeks silently as, almost at the limit of her young and vigorous pace, she passed on, passed upwards, pursued by the one overmastering impulse to get away, to find some safe resting-place for what she would fain have carried.

But, by degrees, her thoughts became calmer; she began to see the whole pitiful story and put her finger in-

tuitively on the points of offence; for she had seen little of the world, and knew still less of its ways. She thought of the lowing heifer and its bull-calf, of the second brood of young blackbirds over whose first flight she had but that morning seen the parents so excited, and then she thought of the fatherless unsought child whose only worth was the bringing of two-and-sixpence a week to its grandmother!

Truly her grandfather was right. Money was a curse.

But so were other things. The religion, for instance, which told poor Gwen that her child was accursed, that its death was a punishment. Poor Gwen seated in her threadbare black, with her apron over her head, so unlike the girl in a blue cotton dress who used to tumble about on the thyme banks with her boisterous, rosy-cheeked baby.

It was pitiful. That cry *Beth n'ai! Beth n'ai! Gwae fi! beth n'ai!* rang in Aura's ears as she sat down at last among the rocks of a sheep-shelter on the crest of a hill. Here in winter the south-west winds howled and swept the bare braes, wasting their force against the lichen-set boulders behind which even the shearling lambs could lie snugly, but in this early autumn the sun baked into the close-cropped turf, and mushrooms grew in clusters where the lambs had lain.

It was a favourite outlook of Aura's, for it gave over the widening estuary and the sea beyond. Beyond that again the setting sun; for it was growing late, and the autumn days began to close in.

She sat there on the wild thyme thinking, making up—as the young do almost unconsciously—her mind about many things, reaching forward to the future vaguely with certain new thoughts regarding it in her mind, and all the while watching the great pageant of the Death of Day enact itself out in the West.

It was a lurid sunset; full of flames, of deep, purple-stained clouds. It was a pageant of passion, self-existent, self-destroying.

Yet it was beautiful! She would sit and watch it to

the end, she would see the anger and the threat of it pass into grey calm when the sun had gone.

So she sat on, the lilies still in her lap, until she was roused by a step, by one word—

"Gwen!"

She turned startled, to see the startled face of a young man behind her. It was a beautiful face, the sort of a face which women love, and in its quick amaze there was almost a hint of appeal, of hope for fair hearing.

The girl grasped the situation in a moment. He had been misled by her blue dress. He had thought she was Gwen; poor frail Gwen who was not "all wise," yet still had been wise enough to keep this secret of hers.

He turned with a half-muttered apology, in another instant he would have been gone, but Aura's strong, firm fingers were on his wrist; she looked at him from head to foot, judging him.

Then with one swift sweep of her other hand she struck his handsome face full with the fading lilies she still held.

"Coward!" she said. "Go! your task is done!"

The flowers broke softly on his warm flesh and blood, leaving no mark, but her words seemed to shrivel him; he slunk away.

She watched him disappear down the hillside, then with a sob she flung herself face down on the short turf, crushing the lilies to their death, and cried as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER IX

THE little village of Dinas was in a turmoil. Considering its small size, and the extreme peace of its situation happed round by everlasting hills, and so cuddled close to the very heart of calm creation, it held an extraordinary capability for fuss. The hot Celtic blood would get into the hot Celtic brain at the slightest provocation, and it had risen from the sub-normal of rural life to the fever-heat of a revolution over a baby whom some one had refused to baptize, and some one else had declined to bury.

The rector, relying on the Middle Ages, had pointed to the nettle-grown corner reserved for those whose salvation was doubtful. The whole Calvinistic body, forgetful of election and predestination, had fled as one man from the authority of the Bible to that of the Burials Act.

Radical religion and religious radicalism had once more met in grips, and the guarantors of the little telegraph station in the village breathed freely by reason of the wires that were sent, and that came from the princes and powers of darkness and light all over the country.

The result was, of course, that foregone conclusion of these later days—a compromise. The churchyard belonged to the parish, the burial service to the Church. And so, with a curious falter at its innermost heart because of the absence of the rector's familiar surplice and biretta, the village had signalised its victory by a triumphal following of Gwen's baby to the grave, not of its fathers, but its mothers.

As they gathered round the coffin which looked so tiny far away down in the greasy, black earth, the sound of "Day of wrath, that dreadful day," sung by the rector at his usual evening service, floated out from the church

to join Morris Pugh's indignant militant prayer to the Almighty; but the peaceful little dead child slept undisturbed by either.

Yet the rector, honest man, had no ill-feeling at all, but rather a profound pity for the lamb of his flock who had been lost through ignorance on his part, for had he known of its illness nothing would have prevented him from storming the shepherd's hut and claiming his right as rector. Indeed, but for the necessity for reprobating the scandalous withholding of one of the Church's sacraments from an innocent soul because its parents were blameworthy, there is small doubt that he would have asked no questions, and buried the small dead body decently and in order. As it was he came, after service was over, tall and cassock-garbed, to stand beside the tiny mound of new-turned soil which broke the lush green of the churchyard, make the sign of the cross over it, and pray a little prayer for mercy.

Nevertheless, he went back to his study and his ecclesiastical histories a harder man for the incident. His bishop had not upheld the authority of the Church; he had—in all reverence be it spoken—hedged, and the Rev. Gawain Meredith was too priestly, soul and body, for hedging with heretics.

For there was no mincing of words about him. The Wesleyans were possibly schismatics; all other dissenters were heretics, and the Calvinistic Methodists the most distinctly dangerous heretics with whom he had to deal. They reminded him in their social, religious, and political organisation of the Jesuits whose history he was studying. He had a reluctant admiration for their determination to force means to an end, and he saw plainly how much capital they would make out of his refusal to bury the body. Elections to the parish council were coming on, and he had already made himself unpopular by questioning the expenditure. So he read the paragraphs concerning the baby's burial which he found waiting for him on his study table in the weekly local, with a setting of his thin lips. They might turn him out of the

council if they choose, but while he was in it, he would do his duty by the ratepayers.

Morris Pugh had read these same paragraphs in manuscript; they had been sent to him for revision, and he had returned them without a word of comment; yet he had felt a vague regret pluck at his heart.

He was an enthusiast, pure and simple. Those chiefs of his party, who seized so quickly on every point of vantage, were enthusiasts and something more.

He felt ill at ease; though, in attempting to get at the truth concerning Gwen's fault he had acted almost at the instigation of his elders. Isaac Edwards and Richard Jones, stern fathers of the village, had been inexorable, and so Gwen, once the pride of the choir, despite her being "light in the weighing," had been practically excommunicated. Not that there had ever been any intention of such excommunication being permanent, or of its injuring the child; but spasmodic croup waits for nothing, and so—so the Middle Ages and the Burials Act had come into conflict.

This, however, was not the only cause for Morris Pugh's uneasiness.

Oddly enough, the disturbing element was the hundred pounds which Ned Blackborough had hidden in the cleft of the rocks. The last two months had been one long temptation to go and take it at all costs—take it and say nothing. And yet his soul revolted from the very idea. The constant conflict, however, had forced him into clearer thought, and he had shrunk back in horror from much that he saw in himself and others. The greed of gold! How it riddled all human life; it even touched the next, for it was the mainspring of religion. Money! Money! There was a perpetual call for it. Half the spiritual life of his flock was due to the efforts of those who had built the chapel and who worked—for God, no doubt—but also to get five per cent. interest on their mortgages.

Yes! the souls for whom Christ died were bartering them for gold.

O! for something, some voicing of the Great Spirit, to stir them to a nobler commerce!

This was his desire, his constant prayer, and he had grown haggard and anxious over the stress of both.

The last two days also had brought a fresh anxiety. Mervyn, his brother, had returned from a month's visit to Blackborough, curiously moody, curiously unlike himself; that is the earnest, clever lad who for years had been the pride of the village, the joy of his mother's and of his brother's heart. No doubt his failure to pass the examination had discouraged him; but was that all? It did not really matter; he was young yet, had another chance, and meanwhile could go on as he was, earning enough to keep him as clerk to the village councils and boards.

So as Morris Pugh, hollow-eyed, pale, lingered at the grave of the little child which he had just committed to the dust whence it had come, there was no stability in his thoughts. They wandered on dreamily until, suddenly as a flash, came the certainty that one of the many mourners, who had but a minute before been looking down on the tiny coffin, was father to what it held.

And he had stood there silent, unrepentant!

Yes; it must be so, for poor Gwen was no wanderer; her own people sufficed for that limited life.

He covered his face with his hands and turned swiftly, almost to stumble over his brother who stood behind him. His face was haggard also, and Morris looked at it with a quick dread clutching at his heart.

"There's—there's nothing wrong is there—Merve—" he faltered.

The lad flushed crimson. "Only you've trodden on my toe; that's all," he answered, bending low to brush off the dust of the grave which his brother's foot had left on his boot.

"I beg your pardon," replied Morris Pugh slowly; then the remembrance that he was pastor here as elsewhere made him add, "I was so overcome by the horrible

thought that the father of that poor child must have been here—beside us, Merve."

But the lad's face was up again; he looked his brother calmly in the face.

"I suppose he was; but what is the use of bothering about it? The thing's over—" He glanced at the grave as he spoke, and looked back at his brother almost impatiently. "Oh! for God's sake, Morris, let her be—I dare say it—it was a sort of mistake—he mayn't have meant—but anyhow, the thing's done with!"

"Done!" echoed Morris; "how can it be done without repentance?"

Mervyn's handsome eyes narrowed, his lip set. "And how do you know he doesn't repent? If the—the baby had lived it might have been worth while; but now—" he smiled suddenly. "Don't worry any more about it, there's a good chap. Mother will be waiting tea for us, and you have all those envelopes to send round this evening."

Morris Pugh winced under the reminder. Yes! tomorrow was Collection Sunday, and each household of the faith must be provided with an envelope addressed to it in which the offering must be enclosed, thus enabling those in authority to trace home any inadequate donation.

Oh! would the time never come to the Church of Christ when the Elect would need no such precautions against cheating their God? For that was what it meant.

His whole soul sickened as he thought of how each one of his flock would weigh the balance between this world and the next. And yet a good collection was the vivifier of spiritual life. Without it, how could extra preachers be paid for, and the religio-social work of the community be kept up?

It was late ere all the arrangements for the morrow, including a reception and prayer-meeting in honour of the Reverend Hwfa Morgan, who was to conduct the morning service, were over; but even then Morris Pugh had not finished his work. That was to wrestle through

the night in prayer for Divine Guidance, for Divine Help.

And all the while the slow, certain stars wheeled in their appointed courses to meet the dawn, the dawn that came true to its appointed time.

There was a stir in the village, of course. To begin with, there was the excitement of a new preacher. Would he come up to his reputation? And would the performance of the village choir be satisfactory? Then, as all the outlying members of the congregation came in from the distant farms early, there was the additional excitement of hearing and giving gossip. As one of the yearly functions, too, Collection Sunday was a festival for fine clothes. Alicia Edwards wore hers, an entirely new get-up which, remembering Myfanwy's look at Mervyn, and having in mind various penny novelettes in which jealousy played the principal part, she had ordered from another shop in Blackborough. For she was becoming reckless. At heart she was an excellent creature, but her education had been against her. She had learnt so much that was absolutely unnecessary for what she wanted to make out of life. What did it matter to her whether she could reel off the names of the claimants to the crown of Spain during the War of Succession? All she really desired was love; sentimental, not overpassionate love. Life without emotion was to her an empty life. Other girls, feeling as restless as she did, might have defied home authority and followed, say, Myfanwy Jones's lead; but she was too dutiful, and in addition she had a reputation to keep up, the reputation of being the best girl in the village. Her father, of whom she was desperately afraid, talked of a Training College for Teachers; she held her peace, and lived feverishly for the moment. That, at any rate, was productive of emotion!

So she put on her finest clothes and went down to meet Mervyn at the chapel door, and greet him with a sprightly challenge and a little quiver of her lip: Not that she was really in love with him. Any other of the

stalwart young men, who cultivated the same forehead curl, would have done as well, if he had been attracted by her and called her his darling, and asked her to be his wife; for all her education had left her woman—woman pure and simple.

There was quite a crowd at the chapel door, a general excitement over the thought of the new preacher, though to many a bent old man and worn old woman the great event of the day was in the envelope, safely tucked away in the Bibles they clutched so confidently. For, realising that this might be their last donation, they had given their ransom for the skies. Isaac Edwards fussed round, keeping a watchful eye for the doubtful members of the flock; and the Reverend Hwfa Morgan, a tall young man who might have looked sensual but for his exceeding pallor, spoke to the favoured few, giving them a taste of his fluency.

He was extraordinarily fluent. His periods swept along soundfully and brought forth many encomiums in the brief period between the services, for the evening hour had been put forward to the afternoon in order to allow the outermost outsiders to get home ere dark, and thus have no excuse for absence.

So the westering sun shone full into the bare, whitewashed chapel when Morris Pugh, as a preliminary to his final appeal, stepped forward, and the Reverend Hwfa Morgan stepped back for the moment.

There was the difference of two worlds between their faces. As Morris gave out a well-known Welsh hymn, a little sudden thrill seemed to vibrate in the humanity-burdened air of the packed chapel.

What was it?

The quaint modulations rose and fell in wide compass, now high, now low. Would the Spirit of the Lord speak in a singing voice?

The thought was no new one; it had been in Morris Pugh's mind as he had listened of late to the oft-told tale — which grew in the telling — of the mysterious music in the church on Trinity Sunday.

But no! The hymn died away to its Amen, and there was no sign.

So he began his address.

And then suddenly his eye caught a figure by the door, a figure in black, close veiled. Surely it was Gwen—Gwen the sinner?

And then he spoke again. He had passed the night in prayer; he had eaten nothing; the whole body and soul of him was in deadly earnest.

Whether there was something more than this or not, that in itself has to be reckoned with, especially with an emotional audience.

So, as he spoke of the dead child, an old woman, her face seamed with wrinkles, seemed to feel a half-forgotten tug at her breast and began to weep; an old man, straining with almost sightless eyes for some glimpse which might make the young, flexible, lamenting voice more earthly, less heavenly, followed suit. Then the golden haze which filled the chapel seemed to hold a radiance, and close to the speaker, Alicia Edwards gave a little half-suffocated cry and tore, as if for breath, at the laces round her throat.

And still the insistent, strenuous voice held to its high protesting pitch of passionate reproof. Its cadence was the only sound——

No! What was that?

From the figure by the door a sound—the merest shadow of a sound!

'Just as I am without one plea.'

The Welsh translation of a sinner's joy was familiar, and a thrill, individual yet collective, ran through the chapel as, turning, every one in it saw Gwen, her whole face, sodden with tears, transfigured into angelic light and peace and joy as she sang—

'Save that Thy Blood was shed for me.'

The strenuous man's voice failed suddenly before the exquisite sweetness of the woman's, but only for a moment. A voice less strenuous, yet still a man's, joined in the singing, then another woman's.

So, by ones and twos and threes, the message of certain salvation grew from a whisper to a storm of sound.

'O Lamb of God, I come!'

And then?

Then, while Morris Pugh stood white, trembling, almost appalled, the Reverend Hwfa Morgan sprang forward with a shout of "Hallelujah!"

It swept away the last barrier of reserve. With cries and groans the congregation leapt to its feet or grovelled in the dust.

"Speak to them, man, speak to them, the Spirit is upon you," urged the Reverend Hwfa Morgan, as Morris Pugh still stood, paralysed by the realisation of his prayer.

So he essayed to speak, but the power did not lie with him. It lay in the soft, almost unearthly, harmonies of Gwen's voice, and Mervyn's, and Alicia Edwards, followed by those of many a young man and maiden. Over and over again some wild Welsh chant pitted itself against prayer or preaching, or even the earnest confession of sin from some sinner, and always with the same result, a victory for the service of song. Against that soothing background even Time itself seemed lost. The evening drew in wet and stormy. The necessity for closing the chapel doors burdened the pent air still more with man's great need of forgiveness. The miserable ventilation, which sanitation allows to churches and forbids to theatres, made women faint and strong men turn sick, while every now and again a burst of unrestrained laughter or sobbing told of nerves strained to the breaking point.

It was nigh dawn when, by the light of a pale moon obscured by drifting storm-clouds, Morris Pugh turned

the key in the chapel door with a trembling hand. The Reverend Hwfa Morgan and Isaac Edwards were waiting for him on the wet, glittering steps.

"That is over," he muttered slowly in Welsh.

"Over!" echoed his brother cleric. "If the Lord will, it has just begun: from it will spread a wave of revival. You and those sweet singers—!" His excitement was too much for him, he reverted to English, "Yes, indeed! We will have a collection——"

Isaac Edwards slapped his thigh with an inarticulate ejaculation.

"Morris Pugh," he said, his voice quivering with regret, "we have forgotten it. God forgive us, we have forgotten the money!"

CHAPTER X

"You might have known, if you hadn't been in a dream," muttered Mervyn Pugh as he sat, his face hidden in his hands. "Nothing can be done without money, nothing, and it wouldn't have mattered if it had not been for this cursed meeting—and—and the rector——"

"Don't curse him, Merve," broke in Morris Pugh, who stood, with the look of one newly awakened, near the window, gazing out vaguely at a rising star, which lay on the distant hilltop like a visitant from heaven. Even as he looked, his mind all confused and blurred, the novel thought came to him that with such high and holy messengers at His command, the Creator need not have condescended to send such farthing dips of wandering lights to mark His elect, as some which had been manifested during the revival.

For a month had passed since Gwen's singing of the hymn had electrified the little congregation at Dinas, a month during which——

What had happened?

Morris Pugh, looking at his brother, saw that past month as in a dream, indeed. He, as the preacher, forgetful of everything save his mission, and those four voices, Gwen's soprano, Alicia Edwards's contralto, Mervyn's tenor, and Hwfa Morgan's bass, blending into every message of penitence or peace which emotion could desire. So they had gone preaching and singing, rousing an almost frenzied response wherever they went. And all the while——

"I don't understand yet," he said slowly. "Why was all this money required?"

Mervyn echoed the "all" with half-pathetic scorn.

"A hundred pounds doesn't go far in running a revival," he said savagely. "One must start the thing. Why, even before we left Dinas, Gwen and Alicia had to get their clothes, they couldn't go in what they had got, and there was music wanted. One had to get a chorus, and the men couldn't sit up all night and work all day. Morgan and I talked it all over, for some one must look after practical things, you know, and I said I would finance it till the subscriptions came in. It's no use your looking like that, Morris. Any fool would tell you money had to be got somehow *for the time*, and it would have been all right but for this row with the rector. That isn't my fault."

Morris Pugh started as if he had been stung. "No! it was mine," he said. "I am the elder. I ought to have considered."

Mervyn rose quickly, and, going over to his brother, laid a caressing hand on his shoulder.

"Now don't, Morris," he said, using a common Welsh endearment, "let us forget ourselves for a while. I suppose it was wrong, but—" here his lip quivered, "it musn't injure the work. My God! how awful that would be." He flung himself on the chair again and, stretching his arms out over the table, positively sobbed. He was a prey to every emotion, every feeling that in this moment of anxiety and bewilderment swept over him, for he and his brother had come home but half an hour ago full of elation from a successful meeting at the other end of the county, to find that the rector, ousted member of village boards and councils, had insisted on a scrutiny of the accounts ere making over office next day.

And Mervyn knew that the balance would be a hundred pounds short; the hundred pounds which had been paid over by the central fund for educational purposes, and which should have been deposited in the Post Office Bank when it had come in a month ago. He had not done so, however, because, on emergency, he had borrowed the loan of the use of it for something else.

To do him justice that was all he had meant. Once

the revival was fairly started the monetary question could be allowed to crop up, but without money in the background to make it possible to pose as having no regard to money, how could the very committees which would work the business properly be called into existence? At the time he had thought of nothing but God's service, and even now he felt little remorse. His sense of conversion was too strong, and the whole month of incessant irritation of every possible religious emotion had left him a pulp so far as actual facts were concerned . . . and as a rule the village accounts went on and on endlessly . . .

He lifted up his hand and smote the table impotently. Great heavens! what was to be done? That hundred pounds must be replaced somehow.

As he thought of how it had been spent, he felt vaguely uncomfortable over an item which had gone to pay a small bill of his own, contracted in amusing Myfanwy Jones at Blackborough. He felt ashamed of that, but he had no shame for other things in the further past. A curious fanatical exultation filled him as he thought how marvellous were God's ways, and how men and women, sinners utterly, might stand in all innocence together and proclaim infinite mercy. Inscrutable mystery! Almost incredible secret tie of forgiven sin, which made the voices thrill and blend.

And this must end unless there was money. They had but a few hours, and even Hwfa Morgan was not there to help with advice. He would not return till morning, so there was only poor, dreamy Morris, absorbed in the personal issues.

There was but one issue! That there should be no setback to the overwhelming success of the revival.

For it had been successful beyond measure, in works as well as words.

In Dinas itself, the cotoneaster-covered inn might have put up its shutters for all the liquor sold at the once-frequented bar. There was no swearing or quarrelling from one end of the parish to the other. Even the

snaring of their neighbours' rabbits for Sunday dinner, ultimate crime of a Welsh quarryman, had ceased. And these were but the outward and visible signs of a great inward and spiritual grace. A sense of perfect personal peace had fallen upon the mass of men.

There were no more anxieties, no more fears. Heaven and its golden harps were within the reach of all, and, looking forward, each personality could see itself surviving death and going on unchanged for ever and ever and aye. So the Grave had lost its Victory. Each trivial soul was safe.

The result in pure morality, not only in Dinas but throughout the whole countryside, was unquestionable. Even those who disapproved of such emotional excitement, or who, like the rector, viewed with disfavour all outpourings of grace except through the appointed channels, could not deny this, and were driven to darkling hints as to the staying power of such religious feeling.

Only Martha, going down in state to order the usual gross of matches at the village shop—the carriage arrangements precluded their purchase with all other things at the Stores—fell foul of the whole business, lock and stock and barrel, to Isaac Edwards, whom she found singing hymns while he did up the pound package of sugar, in which the paper, heavy blue, was included in the weight. Not that it was his fault that this was so. It was only one of the usual tricks of a trade which on a small scale cannot possibly be run straight.

"You'll excuse me," she said with a sniff, "but it strikes me as you're all a deal too free with the Almighty. But there, once folk stops making their reverences to the gentry, 'tain't long ere they get to noddin' at their Creator. An' you don't go to the Bible for your crowded-up night-watches, Mr. Edwards. King David, an' he oughter know, says mornin', evenin', an' noon. At night 'e watered 'is bed with 'is tears an' was still, like a decent gentleman. There wasn't none of this not-comin'-home-till-mornin' business, and how folks as 'as to work hard for their livin' does it, beats me. I'll set up agin

most, but I'm a pore piece next day, an' wouldn't ask a full wage of anybody, not I! And as for the young folk; you mark my words, Mr. Edwards! Gels is gels, an' boys is boys, whether they stands in a kirk or a mill, as the sayin' is. An' they'll find it out for theirselves, poor sillies, by an' by, if them as is past 'youth's hay-day' don't harvest-home 'em before lights out. So there! An' you can send up a gross an' a half o' matches if you think that not bein' o' your way o' believin' I shall 'ave to 'arden myself to brimstone.''

So she had departed; but her warnings had been as chaff before the wind while the harvest was being gathered in.

The flood-tide of popular opinion lifted even the wildest extravagances as well as the most sober actuality and carried them with it. Whither remained to be seen.

And now?

Morris Pugh, standing at the window looking in dull amaze at the star which had by this time dissociated itself entirely from earth, could not think what would happen now.

Everything on which he had any grip seemed to have gone. Since that day, a long month ago, when his voice had failed before Gwen's voice, he had, like the star, dissociated himself from the material world altogether. He had given the rein to his emotions, he had lived in the clouds, never asking or thinking how Alicia and Gwen came to be dressed so becomingly, never inquiring how the expenses of railway tickets, hiring, placarding, advertisements, notices in the papers, all the thousand and one absolute necessities for a successful meeting, were defrayed. So the truth came upon him with deadly force. Morally a far stronger man than his brother, he could not for the moment get beyond the actual fact of fraud.

How could Mervyn have taken the money? How could he?

"Well!" said the latter at last, rising to pace the room impatiently, nervously. "Can't you suggest something?

The money must be replaced somehow. We daren't risk anything. What can be done? and in the next few hours. —Oh! it is maddening to think how many would be willing to lend it if we had only time! To think even of the thousands who have hundreds and hundreds of pounds to fling away on a fancy, and this——" he paused, arrested by his brother's face. "What is it, Morris? what—what makes you look like that?"

For answer Morris sank to his knees and covered his face as if in prayer. "I thank Thee, O my God!" he murmured, "this hast Thou prepared aforetime. O ye of little faith—of little faith!"

"What is it, Morris?" repeated Mervyn curiously. The last month had done its work on him also. He was prepared for all things, all signs, and wonders. "You might tell me," he added, after a pause.

"No!"

Morris's face came up from his hands full of triumphant, transcendental exultation. "No! That is a secret between me and my God. But the hundred pounds is found! It is found, I tell you! Oh! marvellous, most marvellous! Truly He moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

For Mervyn's words had recalled to him in a flash the half-forgotten memory of Ned Blackborough's hidden money, and his mind attuned to miracles, super-sensitised to the direct dealings of Providence with man, leapt to the conclusion that the hundred pounds, so idly, so carelessly flung away on what appeared a mere fancy, was in truth a heavenly provision against this urgent need.

The thought explained so much. The devil of greed within him, which had urged him to take the money for his own use—the gradual unfolding, through this temptation, of the desire for some outpouring of the Spirit. Here were more marvels than he had time at present to consider. The great fact was sufficient, that in the wilderness the table had been spread.

"It was wrong to take the money, Merve," he said, his face suffused with a heavenly joy; "we must not forget

that—we must weep and pray over that; but it was for His service, and He has forgiven us—the money is found!"

"But when—that is the point," began Mervyn anxiously; "it must be by to-morrow morning, and it is late——"

"You will wake to find it on the Bible by your bedside, my brother," interrupted Morris solemnly, "and then we will give thanks unto the Lord, for He hath done marvellous things. Come to supper now; our mother will be anxious at our delay. Leave the rest in His hands."

The moon was riding high amid the stars when Morris Pugh, closing the door of the sleeping cottage behind him with a whispered benediction on its inmates, started for his climb to the gap where Ned Blackborough had hidden the hundred pounds. The night air struck chill, for it was late October, but he was in far too exalted a frame of mind to consider such earthly things as overcoats or comforters. His exaltation, indeed, would have seemed incredible even to the self of six weeks ago; for, despite his enthusiasm, he had been hard-headed and practical enough. Now, enervated by constant use of his emotions, it seemed to him—full to the brim as he was by right of his Cymric birth with imaginative fire, poetry passion—that he was going up into the mountain alone to meet his Lord and receive a gift from His hands.

He felt as Moses must have felt on Pisgah, as St. Jerome felt when the last Sacrament was vouchsafed to him. Those last few weeks had made an ecstatic out of the enthusiast. He saw nothing but his Lord, he heard nothing but the call to come.

Marvellous! Most marvellous!

Yes! of a truth! for about him—to him unseen—lay the great marvel of the Real Presence in the world, above him the marvel of the Real Presence in the skies and stars. But the stones were to his eager feet but stumbling-blocks, the glory of the starlight and the moonlight was but the halo of a concrete heaven.

Still it was very rapture; worth in itself a thousand times the petty hundred pounds which had called it into being. Put into bald English, here was a man going to take money which he wot of, in order to save his brother from disgrace. Translated into the terms of emotional religion, here was a sinner about to find salvation.

The night was very clear, very cold. The stars sparkled brilliantly, aloofly. There was a suspicion of frost-crackle in the thick covering of dew which lay like a filmy gossamer quilt over the grassy uplands. The startled sheep left a darker track of dew-despoiled herbage behind their flying footsteps. There was no cloud upon the sky whose velvet darkness seemed devoid of light save for the unhaloed moon and the sharp shining stars.

But Morris Pugh saw none of these things. He had found what he sought—what all Religions seek—the Self that is not yourself. He had found it through an abstraction of the mind, not through the manifold face of matter. But the sense of finality, of universal Oneness, comes in a thousand ways, and he felt it fully. He could have sung in the gladness of his heart, even while his stumbling feet bruised themselves over the unheeded stones.

The little rush-fringed pool, by which he had sat with the others asserting that money was the root of all evil, lay so still, so shining, so set, that it also might have been frost-bound—like the heart of man before the Mercy of the Most High had touched it.

The root of all evil!

Morris smiled. He knew better now. There was nothing evil in the Holiest of Holies. Money was a great gift.

So, as if before an altar, every atom of him, soul and body, thrilling with high expectation, he knelt before the cleft in the rock to receive what had been given. His very hands trembled.

"Not unto us, Lord, but unto Thy name," he murmured softly.

Then came a pause. His fingers, feeling the cleft, found it empty.

Empty! Incredible! Impossible! A great amaze took him. He stood up and stared vacantly at the receding whiteness of the dew-covered, moonlit steeps.

Empty!

Then what became of——

Of everything!

He had been so buoyed up by certainty. He had been so sure of himself and of his God. He sat down on the frost-wet grass after a time and tried to think; but his mind was in a maze. He followed one path of thought after another, always to be brought up by that barrier of feeling that he had been fooled; or he had fooled himself. Had it not been for his previous exaltation, his exultation, he might by degrees have accepted the situation and considered which of the three other participants in the secret had been beforehand with him. But there was no question of being beforehand with him. If what he had felt—nay! had known—was true, they had been beforehand with God.

How long he sat, he did not know. It came upon him by surprise to hear the voice of a shepherd calling to his dogs. He looked round, and lo! it was long past dawn. He must go back and tell Mervyn that he had made a mistake; or was it Someone else who had been tricked?

When he arrived at the village the first early hour had passed, and folk were already beginning the day's work. Ah! what would Mervyn say, and what would he do?

It was terrible to try the latch of the cottage, find it open, and know that his brother must be waiting for him; waiting so anxiously. But there was a respite. Mervyn was not in. Hwfa Morgan had arrived early, the woman who tended the house said, and they had gone out together just as she came in to light the fire.

Morris sat down beside it vaguely relieved. Hwfa Morgan might think of something. Meanwhile the warmth of the fire was comforting. He must have been

very chill. His blood seemed to rush and bound through him like a melting river.

He was startled from a half-doze by Mervyn's entrance, and he stood up unsteadily.

"I am sorry, brother," he began, "but I—I mean some one has failed——"

Mervyn interrupted him curtly. "It's lucky I didn't trust to you—but it is all right—the thing's settled. Hwfa Morgan turned up this morning, and as you hadn't come back we talked it over, and he suggested taking Edwards into our confidence. So we went over to him, and he saw it would be as dangerous to his interests as to ours if there was any fuss, so he consented to take our security—yours, too, of course—that he shouldn't be a loser, and gave me a voucher of deposit all right. It can only be a question of a fortnight or so, for once a Central Committee takes over the revival regularly our expenses will be paid——"

"But the voucher?" began Morris.

Mervyn interrupted him impatiently, his naturally high colour heightening itself considerably.

"Oh! yes! of course. He—he antedated it. Luckily there had been no other deposits for three weeks, so the numbers on the counterfoils worked all right. And it doesn't really matter to any one, does it?"

He spoke a trifle defiantly.

"No," replied his brother, with an odd sound between a sob and a laugh. "I don't suppose it matters to—to any one. I—I think I'll go to bed, Merve—I must have got a chill on the mountains—I—I don't feel well."

"But there is the meeting," expostulated Mervyn; "it won't go without you."

Morris shook his head. "I should be no use, Mervyn —I—I can't even think." And then, strong man as he was, he broke down into sobbing.

CHAPTER XI

A WHIRLING spin and din of machinery filled the air. All around was endless revolution, above was the ceaseless, curiously slow progression of the driving bands, those heavy-footed transmitters of elusive incomprehensible force, and below, under the great iron framings which held half a million machines in position, were men and women, grime-covered, fluff-covered, dust-covered, according to their trade, all moving about like automata with dead-alive hearts and hands, attending on some marvellous adaptation of mechanical power devised by those sane human hearts and hands out of their own powers. Pulley and lever, and inclined plane, with all their endless derivatives, were hard at work, for Blackborough was the biggest manufacturing centre in the kingdom, and Blackborough was in the middle of its day's work.

And then, suddenly, a clock struck. Another given moment of eternity had passed, the wheels stopped, the throbbing air grew still. Then from a thousand wide gateways humanity began to stream forth to flood the streets. The stream was thinner, less continuous than usual, for it was Saturday; therefore pay-day, and tallies had to be made up at the cashier's desk.

So they came out by twos and threes, counting their gold and silver. For half Blackborough, the past six days had resolved themselves into pounds, shillings, and pence.

"*She* won't be 'ere likely, o' Monday," sniggered one of two girls, their hair already in curling-pins against the evening's outing, as they passed a weary-looking woman whose thin shawl failed to conceal her figure, and whose heavy foot dragged over the greasy pavement. "Wot ever did she go and get married for, an' to sech

a drunken fellar too. She was a good-lookin' gel and 'ad a good time four year back.''

'' Oh! She'll be at it agin in a month's time none the worse,'' giggled the other girl pertly. '' She lost 'er two fust, an' this 'un 'ull go too, you'll see. Just as well, and they comin' so rapid. My! They is fair beasts, they husbands; but I'd see mine futher fust, I would! ''

And then, as they hurried home to dress, they fell to discussing the new hats which were '' to do the real trick with their boys '' on Sunday, when a long cycle ride was to end in a midnight train, a late supper, and after that bed—if there was time!

Even in their mill garb, they helped to swell the general tendency to lark and titter in the streets; but in truth those same streets were a somewhat curious sight on Saturday afternoons, when, with money in its pocket, humanity was, at last, at leisure to be human; to loiter, to laugh, and to make love. For the upper crust of Blackborough society—the old red-sandstone section labelled '' Court '' in the social stratification of the postal directory—made a point of rural week-ends, so leaving the human pie free from any covering of culture.

It was amusing to watch. Advocates of realism would have found pictures and to spare amid the overdressed girls whose week's wage had been squandered on their finery, in the undersized boys prematurely given to ogle who had spent theirs on football, bets, and cheap cigarettes.

And as the daylight died down the squalor of it all showed still more clearly beneath the flaring gas-jets. Especially in the market streets where all the week's refuse of the great city was exposed for sale, warranted sound, while buyer and seller alike winked over the warranty!

Purple heaps of fly-blown meat labelled '' prime cuts '' in the butcher-shops, battered tomatoes on the barrows with '' best home-grown '' flaunting in green and gold lettering above them; '' genuine '' butter, '' fresh '' eggs, and '' selected dairy-fed pork,'' jostling each other in a booth.

Such is the market which centuries of civilisation have provided for the poor.

And the endless crowd passed and repassed, with money in its pocket, lingering in groups about the gin shines at the corners, giggling, cursing, gossiping, quarrelling; each person treading on the heels of the next, and leaving no human footfall on the oozy pavement; only blisters and scars, only the certainty that some living thing had walked through the mire and carried some of the dirt away with it.

"Fine turbit! fine fresh Grimsby turbit!" shouted a man with a barrow. As he turned down a darker by-street, a phosphorescent glimmer shone from his pile of stale plaice as a testimony to eternal truth!

Peter Ramsay, house surgeon to St. Peter's Hospital round the corner, making his way thither on his bicycle, followed on the glimmer, vaguely interested as to whether that semi-putrescent fish bought for Sunday's breakfast would send him a new patient.

"It's fresh, is it?" asked a wistful-looking old woman from a doorway.

"Smell it, laidy! There ain't no extry charge," retorted the coster surlily.

The old woman shook her head. That test was too stern. "She comes from Cornwall," she murmured to herself, "so 'twud put her more in mind o' 'ome, nor liver, wouldn't it?"

There was a chink of coppers behind Peter Ramsay as he rode on, thinking that some folk ought to be punished for trying to ptomaine-poison the king's lieges.

But his mind was full of something else, and before five minutes were over, he was looking down on a sleeping boy, and wondering vaguely for the hundredth time if he or the other doctors were right? Would an operation—not a known one, of course, but one based on new lines—be of any use or not? He would dearly have liked to try.

In truth here, in the spick and span ward, amid those who had been brought in sickened by that outside squalor,

it was difficult to realise any lack of hygiene, any lack of fair dealing. Yet that lack had left its mark on the sleeping face of the boy. It lay with a cunning elusive look on its sharp features among the white pillows. What a shutting of the door when the steed was stolen it all was!

Looking at him critically, preternaturally sharp, preternaturally diseased in mind and body as he was, it seemed to be a life not much worth saving; and yet!—if it could be saved!

The upright wrinkles on Peter Ramsay's forehead corrugated the transverse ones as he told himself it was useless to think of it here; in Vienna it would have been different. He had already so far as in him lay encouraged the performance of a critical new operation the very next week, and one was enough at a time. He was very keen, very confident, this young surgeon, fresh from his life abroad; ready to criticise even his superiors if they seemed to him old-fashioned. For his hands reaching out into the darkness around him had felt the touch of Something—Something that he would not lose touch of though it eluded him; so he followed it fast, almost heedlessly.

This boy——? If he had had time or money! Then suddenly he smiled. The thought of Ned Blackborough's hidden hundred pounds came to him as it had come more than once during the last few months. Here was a case for it, only unfortunately he had not the time for private work. Still it was odd what a backing that hundred pounds had been to all sorts of day-dreams. Why it should be so, was a psychological problem; since after all, it was but a paltry sum, and, in all probability, it no longer existed for him; for there had been distinct greed on at least two of the faces which had watched its concealment. It had, no doubt, been appropriated long ago. So the boy must go out, comfortably fitted with regulation crutches, to live, possibly, two or three years at the outside. And yet——

He bent regretfully, tracing the twist of the body be-

neath the bed-clothes, then looked up at the lingering of a passing footstep.

"Good evening, Mrs. Tressilian. I beg your pardon, Nurse Helen—I am always forgetting."

"Because you will not remember," she replied with a smile. Then her eyes grew soft; she bent over the bed in her turn; "Can nothing really be done for him, doctor? He is so very patient."

There was something about this woman, Peter Ramsay felt, which took him away, as it were, into a desert place apart with nothing in it save himself, truth, and a listener. He had felt it from the moment he had first seen her; and he had told her the truth even then. It was another curious psycho-physiological problem which evaded dissection and analysis; so he had evaded *her*, ever since—carrying out her promise to herself—she had appeared as a nurse in the hospital now nearly five months ago. But the spell remained.

"Nothing," he replied, half-speaking to himself, and following up his own train of thought; "Nothing at least that will be done—and it would be but an off chance anyhow."

She caught him up swiftly. "Then there is a chance?"

Peter Ramsay's face became a study in cynical reserve; he turned away. "My dear lady," he said, "haven't you been a nurse long enough to know a doctor's convenient formula, 'While there's life, there's hope.'"

To his annoyance as he moved on to the door, she moved also. "I am off duty," she remarked, as if she had not appreciated his slamming of the door in her face, "so it is no breach of rules to tell you that I have had a letter from Ned Blackborough. He is coming back from the Mountains of the Moon—that was about his last address, I believe—but his arm is still troublesome. I should like to show you what he says."

They were in the vestibule now, and Dr. Ramsay paused. He rather admired her pertinacity, and matched her coolness with his own.

"Certainly. May I come in now—or stay! You will want to go out, I expect. Will you look in at my diggings after dinner? I might be able to give you a cup of coffee, if you will?"

"I have no doubt the matron will allow me," she laughed. "Good-bye for the present, Dr. Ramsay."

As he sat waiting for her in a room which beggared description by its untidiness, he felt distinctly nervous; but he was becoming accustomed to the fact that she had a disturbing or rather an exhilarating effect on his nerves. He was a trifle irritated at the fact, a trifle irritated with her because she had fulfilled his predictions.

She was quite normal, and she made an excellent nurse. He had had to admit so much. But it was not her natural metier—that was—something very different.

Possibly he was right. At any rate Helen, entering the room, stood absolutely aghast at its utter lack of comfort. She had been learning much about Peter Ramsay of which she had had no idea, when she came into touch with him in the hospital. To begin with, he was much younger than she had guessed him. She doubted if he was much older, perhaps not quite as old as she was herself. Clever as he was, he had most of the doctor's battle for name and fame before him; and there was a carelessness of public opinion, a certain roughness of very solid truth about him, joined to an utter disregard of his own comfort or that of any one else, except a patient's, which made her feel that here was a man who, above most men, needed a strong, capable, tactful woman to look after him privately, if he was to succeed publicly.

And, though the sick adored him, and every one admitted his skill, he was not one of those men who appeal to the world at large. He was too swift, too incisive. No young woman would darn his stockings because he was a dear; the very maid-servants could leave his room like this!

"I don't expect it's good," he said ruefully, pouring her out a cup of coffee, "but I'm not up to these things.

My mother spoilt me. She died three years ago. She was a widow, and I was her only son.''

Helen, sipping at her coffee, told herself that explained a good deal. He was capable enough professionally, but —the coffee was execrable!

'' It isn't very nice,'' she admitted, '' and why doesn't the housemaid——''

'' Oh! I can't have my things touched,'' he interrupted with a frown; adding as if to change an unwelcome subject, '' So the arm is stiff. I'm sorry. We shall have to try electricity. There's a place in London——''

He was off on some new cure, his red bronze eyes shining, his whole bearing full of confidence and vitality. She waited till the subject was exhausted, and then put down her cup, fixing her eyes humorously on his face.

''And now, please, about that boy—No. 36 in the Queen's ward—I came to speak of him, you know.''

Peter Ramsay faced her half angrily; then he smiled. '' Of course I knew, though I don't see why you wish to find out my opinion.''

''Possibly because I have an idea that your opinion may be right,'' she replied coolly. '' What is it you wish to do? Something quite new, I expect.''

He frowned. '' There you are mistaken. It—or something like it—has been done at Vienna.''

'' By Pagenheim? ''

'' What do you know of Pagenheim? I beg your pardon! I was forgetting that women know everything nowadays. Yes, Mrs. Tressilian, by Pagenheim. He was my master.''

She knew that; knew also that the great surgeon had sent him back to England as his best pupil.

'' Well,'' she said after a time, '' If you won't tell me I will order the *Wiener Hospital Blatt*; I shall see all about it there I suppose.''

This time he laughed out loud. '' You are very persistent, so I will save you the trouble of finding out in which number it is reported.''

When he had finished, she sat looking at him for a moment, feeling a sudden motherly desire to help this curiously capable, curiously inept man, whose strong white surgeon's hands showed themselves firmly gripping each other beyond frail, frayed wristbands.

"But surely if you hold that there is a chance of life for him——" she began.

He rose, and resting his arm on the mantelpiece, looked down on her mentally and physically.

"Life!" he echoed. "What is life worth to him? and how do you know that what we call death ends it? Mind you, I'm not speaking from my own beliefs—they are—well! not much! Belief is positive—I'm not. But you, Mrs. Tressilian. Why do you and your sort hold this life so dear, and why are you all at the same time in such a blessed hurry to get another hour or two of it in which to do something when you believe in a fuller, better life beyond death? It isn't logical. My mother used to say that when she taught me, a three-year-old, about Cain and Abel, I refused to give blame to the former on the ground that he had only sent Abel to heaven. That should be your position."

"And yours?"

"Oh! mine is simple. To a doctor life is merely the converse of death, and death is the devil! We cannot prescribe for a corpse—or for the matter of that levy a fee for so doing—and that is the end and aim of doctoring."

"Why should you say those things, Dr. Ramsay?" she asked quietly. "You know you never take one—at least you would take none from me."

He flushed slightly. "Because I did nothing—and you were an interesting case. I levy a big fee of experience, Mrs. Tressilian. But concerning this boy—my colleagues are against me, and——" He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think the world will come to an end if No. 36 goes out of it. I shouldn't mind if it did—it isn't worth much."

"But are you not bound?" she persisted. "You have

no right to judge what his life might be. A doctor's duty is to save life and defy death at all costs."

His face softened immensely.

"You have got it quite pat, Mrs. Tressilian. That is my duty undoubtedly; but—but I can't afford to do it—as yet—and after all, there is plenty of time—we have a few centuries of evolution before us yet."

"But you—you yourself?" she asked, scanning his face eagerly.

"I," he answered. "I am a temporary aggregation of molecules, or, let us say, electrons. By and by we shall find another word to express the infinitely little—or the infinitely great——"

Here a shrill whistle from the speaking-tube made Helen start and Peter Ramsay smile. "That, I'll bet, will be the infinitely little." He leant over to listen, and his face hardened. "I must go—an old man, apparently in a fit, brought in from the street. Good-bye, Mrs. Tressilian. I'll try and save *his* life anyhow."

She lingered on in the room for a while after he had left it, laying an orderly hand almost unconsciously here and there, and feeling that, had she dared, she would like to have gone into his bedroom beyond, and seen if there were any buttons on the back of his shirts. She remembered having heard him ask the matron for the loan of a safety-pin; that looked ominous.

He, meanwhile, going hastily into the surgery, saw a white-haired figure lying flat on the table, and, having the gift of swift diagnosis, called as he entered,

"Prop him up, please—and—dresser—amyl, sharp."

Held back thus by swift help from sinking down to perfect rest, the weary heart rallied, and after a time the old man's set face wavered, he opened his large, pale-blue eyes, and looked about him.

Then the doctor looked about him also. "Hullo! Cruttenden," he said, "you here?"

"I brought him in," replied Ted Cruttenden; "he was speaking to some work-people in the street when he collapsed."

"If you know his friends, you had better send for them to take him home—he ought not to go alone."

The patient was by this time able to smile. Lying back on the pillow, he looked extraordinarily frail and refined, and his voice, urbane to a degree, matched his appearance.

"Friends!" he echoed. "I have none. I left friendship behind me—with other things—years ago."

"Then, if you know no one, you'd better stop here," suggested Peter Ramsay brusquely.

"I said nothing of knowledge, sir," replied the old man; "I know many, and every one knows me. I am Sylvanus Smith."

Dr. Ramsay glanced swiftly at Ted Cruttenden, as if to refresh a casual memory. "Sylvanus Smith," he echoed. "Oh yes! I remember. Then you live near Dinas, and have a beautiful granddaughter—and—and you know Cruttenden?"

Mr. Sylvanus Smith sat up, and flushed a delicate pink. "Excuse me; neither of those qualifications have any bearing on the question. I am President of the Social Congress, and I do happen to have a slight acquaintance with this gentleman. I have to thank you, sir. I saw you amongst my audience, and I presume——"

"Not at all—not at all," interrupted Ted. "If you like, Dr. Ramsay, I will see him home."

As he said the words, he knew that here was a stroke of luck. Without in any way infringing on his compact with Ned Blackborough, here was an opportunity of ingratiating himself with Aura's legal guardian. He would be a fool not to take it, a fool not to make the very most of it.

And yet when, a whole week afterwards, the old man, leaning out of the through carriage to Wales, in which Ted had placed him duly fortified with papers and egg sandwiches, shook him warmly by the hand, saying, "Then you will come to Cwmfairnog at Christmas." The words brought a distinct feeling of meanness to the hearer. Ned Blackborough would have to go alone to

the inn. That was not what had been intended; but then the whole business was absurd. He had a great mind to back out of it altogether. And here the swift thought came, that from what he had seen of Mr. Sylvanus Smith, a lordling would have scantier grace than a commoner; so that it might be as well if Ned——

A twinge of remorse had to be stilled by the recollection that everything was fair in love and war, and by heaven—no one could love Aura better than he did. No! no one!

Of course, he would have been a fool not to take the luck sent him, and he was a still greater fool to feel that there was in it any stealing of a march on Ned Blackborough.

What would Hirsch say? For, ever since he had given himself up soul and body to that great man, he had formed a habit of referring to him as his standard of conduct. The result here was that Ted positively blushed at his own scruples.

No, if—there was any unpleasantness—it would be better to end the compact, and let them each do their best on their own footing.

His was very different to what it had been five months ago. There was nothing now to prevent his being as rich as Ned Blackborough; or, in the future, having such a title as his. For at bottom, all things were a question of money. That he had learnt from Mr. Hirsch. A quick wave of eager ambition sent the young blood tingling to the finger-tips. He felt glad he might have to fight fair for the girl he loved. Besides, it would be so much fairer on her. She ought not to be deceived. This highly moral thought brought with it such a sense of conscious virtue as sent him back to his office thinking deliberately how Hirsch would admire Aura when he saw her—in pink satin and diamonds of course.

CHAPTER XII

NED BLACKBOROUGH had been to the Mountains of the Moon; at least so he told his cousin when he drove her out from the hospital to New Park the very day of his arrival at home.

"Call it the Mountains of the Moon, my dear," he had said, "it sounds definite and may mean so much—or so little."

This was about a week before Christmas. It gave promise of being a hard one, for a slight sprinkling, more of frost than snow, lay on the roads, and the horses' roughened hoofs echoed cheerfully through the keen air. It was exhilarating, Helen felt, after those long months at the hospital broken only by dull constitutionals. She had begun these by setting her face always to the country; but after a time the long rows of workmen's houses, the dreary muddiness of gravel side-walkings, the intolerable admixture of bricks and bakers' carts had driven her back to wander aimlessly through crowded streets. There she could at any rate see civilisation, pure and undefiled by attempts after the Garden of Eden!

So this was joy. The hedgerows were black with unutterable soot, the sky was grey with smoke, but the birds were twittering among the smutty hips and haws, and overhead a flight of cawing rooks made the grey seem light by their blackness.

She looked round for sympathy to Ned, and was struck by his face.

"You're looking awfully well, Ned," she remarked; "What have you been doing to yourself? You look a perfect boy."

He laughed.

"Having a good time. I found an old man—but that passes. Meanwhile I expect I shall require some healthful calm. My manager tells me the business has been going to pot since I've been away. I shall have to interfere myself, I expect, but that won't be till after Christmas. How's Ramsay getting on?"

Helen looked a trifle stiff. "You had better ask him yourself, you will see him when you drive me back; I only know that he has resigned his appointment."

"So he wrote me. Had a row apparently with the Governing Body—that was ill advised."

"Very," said Helen coolly, "but then Dr. Ramsay has no tact, and is a very obstinate person. Is that New Park? You know I have never been here before."

Ned Blackborough shot a faintly amused glance at her. "It is New Park. Did you ever see an inheritance more calculated to make a man cut his throat?"

It was indeed unexpressibly dreary in its long pompous façade of regularly recessed windows, each with its sham pilasters and heavy entablature.

"It always seems as if it had a sick headache, and it gives me one to look at it. It's a fact," added Ned, as Helen laughed. "It is positively more hideous than—than the Sea View Hotel. I hear, by the way, they have rebuilt that. Have you heard anything more of Hirsch since then?"

Helen gave a fine flush. "He comes down to Blackborough on business. And I have seen him. He is really frightfully distressed because I will not let him pay back that money. Last time he nearly wept."

"He wept because he could not understand," paraphrased Ned. "It is not his fault. It is astonishing how little sense of abstract justice and fairness people have as a rule. They're so set on mercy and loving-kindness that they forget the eye-for-an-eye, the tooth-for-a-tooth ideal. Well, here we are. The house is not quite so bad inside, but it is pretty awful."

It was, though it had been built and upholstered to order regardless of cost. Still there was a certain com-

fort in the dull red flock of its walls, the dull red fleece of its floors, and when once you reached it, the fire lit up the marvellous expanse of priceless tiles, and steel, and ormulu, and bronze, cheerfully enough.

"Don't try and sit on any of those chairs," said Ned, "they're screwed to their places, I believe. Here's a basket one of mine; and will you pour out tea?"

Yet it was pleasant enough sitting there by the fire in the growing dusk, and Ned's heart gave a great throb as he thought of Aura in her blue smock walking unconcernedly over the priceless pile carpets as if they had been Kidderminster. And she would be right. When she was there all other things sank into insignificance.

"It's terribly big," said Helen. "You ought to marry, Ned."

"I suppose I ought," he replied solemnly, but his thoughts were simply running riot over the suggestion; "it is too big for one."

And then he saw a vision of a blue smock held confidingly by a little toddling child, and something in him seemed to rise up and choke him, so that he had to get up, and walk away from his cousin's curious eyes. So to change the subject he began hurriedly—

"I didn't tell you, did I, about that old man I met in the desert—right away from everybody? I don't believe he was real, but he was a wonder. If you talked Herbert Spencer with him he replied with Nietzsche. There wasn't anything he didn't seem to know, and that he hadn't dismissed as not worth knowing. And yet he knew nothing. If you hurled an example at him he was floored. It was all pure thought. He never did anything else but think. You see he was one of their holiest men, and he had sat in the same place for fifty years."

"You have been back to India, Ned," she exclaimed, "you know you have; and I sent all my letters to Algiers."

He came over to her and sat on the arm of her chair, as he used to do when he was a boy.

"They were forwarded—at intervals," he remarked coolly. "Have you never, Nell, wanted to run away for a bit and find yourself naked, out in the open?" And then, airily, he began to hum that graceless ditty of young subalterns at Pekin when the Embassy had been relieved and the Summer Palace occupied, and the allied army amused itself with burlesques on the vanished foe:

"'Fancy me, in this frosty weather,
Posing as Venus among the heather,
Fancy me in the altogether,
At my time of life!'"

"Really, Ned!" exclaimed Helen, unable to repress her smiles, "You are the most ridiculous boy. But if I am to see the domain it is time I began. I must be back by five o'clock."

They were but just in time when he set her down at the hospital and sought out Dr. Ramsay.

He found him writing for dear life, his face positively aglow with vitality and fire.

"Smashing 'em up?" asked Ned, after the first welcome was over and he had lit a cigarette.

Peter Ramsay shifted the papers a trifle shamefacedly. "Yes!" he replied; "it isn't a bit of good, of course; but it relieves my feelings and hurts theirs."

"How did it come about?"

"Didn't Mrs. Tressilian tell you? Well, I suppose I have been a bit of a fool—and yet, I don't see quite what else I could have done. I tell you, Blackborough, there isn't a spot in England on which you can tread firmly without crushing a vested interest. Take, for instance, that pint of beer business. I suppose you know that every one in this hospital is entitled to one pint of beer a day—typhoid fever patients, dying patients—the whole stock, lock, and barrel of nurses, doctors, porters, and such like. If the beer isn't drunk it's at any rate paid for. Think of the vested interests that means. So when I suggested retrenchments, and took the trouble to

lay the German and even the Scotch figures before the governors—it costs a third less at least to run a patient in Scotland—there was the devil and all to pay; and—and some one made disparaging remarks about porridge, and so, of course, there was a row. . . .''

'' Then about the operation.'' Peter Ramsay got up and began to walk about the room, and his voice became more argumentative. '' You see, it was done, and the man died. Well, I wrote an account of it for the medical paper at Vienna, and some one got hold of it and translated it—well! not quite fairly. You see, it was a question whether a certain lesion—but that's a technical detail—I hadn't approved at the time, and I said so; and they made out I asserted the man had been killed through incompetence. All I meant was that it wasn't a fair test of the feasibility of the operation, and it wasn't. I tried to smooth them over, but, as I said at the time, one must tell the truth sometimes.''

Ned Blackborough interrupted with a sudden laugh. '' Did that smooth them over? ''

'' Not in the least,'' replied Peter Ramsay quite seriously, '' and they wouldn't have it either that the translator was a fool and did not know German. So I resigned. There is never any good in trying to work with people who aren't satisfied.''

'' None,'' assented Ned succinctly, ''And what are you going to do? ''

'' Go back to Pagenheim if nothing else turns up. One can live on *würst* over there and no one thinks the —the worse of you, as they do here. My time isn't up till February, but I've offered to go at once if they like.''

'' New Park is at your disposal.''

'' You're awfully kind. If I go—perhaps. But something may crop up.''

As Ned Blackborough drove round to keep his appointment with Ted Cruttenden at his office, he told himself joyously that anything might crop up. These next few weeks had been to him for long so full of pos-

sibilities, that the whole world seemed to him capable of launching out into incredible action, of kicking over the traces even of conventional chance.

His greeting of Ted Cruttenden rather took the latter aback, for he had been carefully preparing for the interview.

"How are you? Will the 11.50 suit you on the 24th?—it suits me."

Ted coughed and looked a little embarrassed, for the inward conviction that, to be quite fair, the invitation to Cwmfairnog ought not to have been accepted came back with the first glance at Ned's—at his friend's face. Still it was no use shirking the subject, so he buckled himself up for his task.

"It will suit all right," he replied boldly, "You had better write for a room at the inn. I—I am going to Cwmfairnog."

"Cwmfairnog?" echoed Ned incredulously.

"Yes — I'm going to stay with — with Sylvanus Smith." For all his boldness he had hesitated, and Ned Blackborough fastened on the pause.

"Why didn't you say with Aura?" There was a trace of scorn in his voice, which Ted resented hotly.

"Because the old man asked me when he came up here. I know it doesn't sound quite fair, Lord Blackborough, but one can't help luck. He felt ill, and I happened to be there, and I had to look after him. Then he asked me to come and stop; and so of course I accepted. You would have done the same if you had been me."

Ned Blackborough was silent for a moment; then said, "Perhaps."

"Oh! hang it all!" broke in Ted. "If you are not satisfied, you needn't feel bound in any way. In fact, I have been thinking a lot, and I have come to the conclusion that your plan isn't quite fair on her. I think she ought to know; and I'd much rather she had her fair choice. You see, neither she nor her grandfather really care for money."

Ned Blackborough smiled. "I see," he said grimly. "On the whole, I believe you are right." Then he thought for a moment or two. "So be it! Each for himself, and the devil take the hindmost! But we will stick to time and place. And if you want a day or two's extra leave I——"

Ted blushed a little this time. "I—I—am not employed by the firm any longer, Lord Blackborough," he said hurriedly; "You have been away—besides, a clerk on a hundred and fifty would hardly come to your ears. But the fact is that—that Mr. Hirsch offered me three hundred."

Ned Blackborough's face took on an expression of amusement. "I begin to understand. So you are on the high road to opulence! Now I wonder why he did that? —you shall tell me in the train—11.50—for I must be off, as I've some business to get through before closing-time."

The business appeared to amuse him also, for the expression did not fade from his face as he drove to the Public Library, hunted up a book on Wales, then drove to a house-agent's and gave an order, and finally stopped at those general *entrepreneurs,* Williams and Edwards, and gave another. Myfanwy Jones, catching sight of him on his way to the senior partner's office, volunteered a remark to the buyer in her department that she knew that fellow, had seen him down at her father's, and was crushed by the reply: "Him! Why, he is Lord Blackborough—the richest peer in England."

She brazened it out by saying "Get along"; but as a matter of fact Ned was repeating much the same information in the office. "I am Lord Blackborough," he was saying, "you need spare no expense. Only see that everything is well done."

The words had a marvellous dynamic power, setting telegraphic wires and express vans and confidential clerks in motion. The result being that when Ned and Ted, who had travelled down third class together in very friendly fashion got out at the station nearest to

Dinas there were two very smart motors cars awaiting them.

"If you will excuse me for a moment," said Lord Blackborough to his companion, "I'll just see my cousin, Mrs. Tressilian—you remember her of course—off for Plas Afon. I've taken it for three weeks and Ramsay and some other people are coming down, so we ought to have a good time. Then I can take you round in the Panhard to Cwmfairnog. It will only make a difference of a mile or two, for Plas Afon, is just the other side of Dinas, you know."

Ted waiting on the platform while Helen, another lady, and a maid were stowed away in the covered car, began to realise that Ned was not going to forgo a single advantage. It was to be check and counter-check on both sides. It had been quick work, and to get hold of Plas Afon—the show place of the neighbourhood—must have needed money indeed! Some day he would be able to do that sort of thing if he chose. But he would not choose. He would never be such a reckless devil as Blackborough. Yet he could not help admiring the go and fire of the fellow!

"So you are going to play the prince over me," he said when they had settled comfortably down under a priceless fox-skin rug and Ned was sending the motor up the hill full speed.

Lord Blackborough laughed. "Not at all! I had to check your move somehow. I couldn't go—as you go—to Mahomet, so I had to try and induce Mahomet to come to me. You will decline my invitations, no doubt, but I shall have done my best. Personally," he added. "I would much rather have stuck to the old plan. Anyhow we won't defile Cwmfairnog with the smell of petrol. We'll leave the motor at the bridge—you can send for your things afterwards—and walk up. Ye Gods! How beautiful this country is in winter."

It was, indeed. The hills lay so still, so soft beneath the pale-blue wintry sky, the distant ones greyly transparent, the near ones showing rounded, red-brown

bracken-covered lights against rounded, misty, violet shadows. The very frost rime on each leaf, each blade of grass, looked soft, and the gold of the slanting sunlight seemed to warm the very icicles which drooped from the high moss-covered, fern-clad banks showing where some trickle of water dropped from the hillside above. But it was up the wooded ravines where the bare branches of the oak scrub followed each curving contour that the ineffable hues of blent shadows and shine showed to their fullest. They were valleys of perfect rest, deep blue in their depths, jasper, jewelled with crystals on their heights.

The footsteps of the two echoed sharply among the rocks. Their shadows, blent into one, preceded them. Yet the thought of both went further ahead still. There were no flowers now, but the brambles dead-green and russet and gold, still thrust out withered fruit-branches across their path. The leafless trees gave clearer vision now. They could see across the stream. There was the garden, the lawn, and on it, by heaven, reaching down red holly-berries from an old tree was a figure in white—Aura herself!

Ned gave a view holloa. She turned round, waved one hand, then dropping her berries waved both.

The thought of the long round by the rhododendrons and the drawbridge was too much for them. The parapet was low, the stream lower still. In a moment they were over it, and racing to meet her like a couple of schoolboys.

She laughed to see them, holding out both hands.

"What a hurry you are in," she cried. "So you have both come. Grandfather said you wouldn't, but Martha and I thought it wiser to get the two rooms ready —and I was right!"

Her welcome disarmed rivalry, and gave both the young men a desire to fall at her feet and kiss the hem of her garment. But they repressed it.

"Of course we have both come!" replied Ned imperturbably. "Are we not the inseparable two-headed, four-armed, four-legged monster, Edward Cruttenden?

don't interrupt me, Ted, I am coming to that by and by. Only Miss—Miss—do you know I don't happen to know your surname. Is it Smith?"

She shook her head with a smile. "Graham—but every one calls me Aura."

"Miss Aura," went on Ned doubtfully.

She looked at him and her eyes twinkled.

"Put on the H, please, if you are going to speak like Martha. Only it sounds better without any prefix."

For some reason or other both the young men found themselves blushing and their hearts beating.

"Much nicer," assented Ted with fervour; but Ned made an elision.

"I was going to tell you that in addition to Edward Cruttenden I have—for my sins—to answer to another name—Lord Blackborough."

She stared and frowned.

"You mean," she said slowly, "that as they put it in the books you are Edward Cruttenden, Lord Blackborough?"

"Edward Cruttenden Gibbs, to be strictly according to Debrett," he answered meekly. "I had to take the name when I came into the title three years ago."

A distinct look of disappointment showed on her face. "It is a very great pity," she said still more slowly; then she added more cheerfully. "However, I suppose it can't be helped. Only when I thought of you it was always as Ned and Ted." She glanced at the latter and smiled.

"So far as I am concerned there is no reason why you shouldn't continue——" he began.

"No reason at all," interrupted Ned with the first note of rivalry in his voice. "Let us remain Ned and Ted for—for this week at any rate."

"This week," she echoed, looking from one to the other, "I don't quite understand." Then suddenly, for the first time in her life she blushed. It was extremely uncomfortable, and she felt vaguely annoyed with both the young men. So she turned to them stiffly. "Will

you come and see grandfather and have tea first, or go to your rooms—you know where they are.''

There was a pause, broken accusingly by Ted. '' Lord Blackborough—I mean Ned——''

'' Thank you,'' put in Ned with a laugh, '' I can do my own dirty work, if you please. The fact is ''—he paused, still fighting shy of that dear name, '' I mean I'm afraid I can't stop. If I had guessed, but—but I didn't! '' He shrugged his shouders. '' It is so hard to predicate perfection. The fact is, my cousin is living at Plas Afon for a fortnight or so, and I must go back to her—after tea.''

'' Plas Afon,'' she echoed eagerly. '' Oh! I hear that is such a lovely place. How lucky you are,'' then the personal aspect of the news made her frown a little. '' Dear me! '' she said, '' what a pity! It spoils so much. Now I shall have to differentiate between you two. Will you come in to tea, Lord Blackborough and Mr. Cruttenden.''

They followed her meekly, feeling vaguely ashamed of themselves.

CHAPTER XIII

"SHE is as straight as a yard o' pump water, an' won't never brush forty again," said Martha up to her elbows in flour, austerely, "but I wouldn't trust her for that neither. No! Not with Bate comin' into his dinner wantin' comfort. He have a trick o' blushin', Miss H'Aura, as sympathy might make a marryin' on—an' I won't have it in the 'ouse."

"But I thought," said Aura gravely, for she was accustomed by now to Martha's view of the new parlourmaid, "that Bate gave Parkinson no encouragement."

"Encouragement," echoed Martha bitterly, "no more he do. Why! he don't even wink at her. Give her the cold shoulder constant; but there! she's o' that sort, Miss H'Aura, as don't mind whether a jint's 'ot or cold so long as it's man's meat. Besides, master 'ud need a woman folk to stand atwixt him and the fun'ral if there was a smash in the motor, for Bate ain't no manner of use when there's tears about—'es got such a feelin' 'eart. So, thanking 'is lordship all the same for the kind thought, I'd better stop at 'ome."

There was never any questioning Martha's decision; so Aura went back to the drawing-room doubtfully. It was a glorious day and Ned Blackborough had come over half-an-hour before, bearing both to herself and her grandfather notes of invitation from Mrs. Tressilian to come over to lunch and see the show place. The notes had evidently been all in order, for though her grandfather had declined brusquely for himself, he had looked at her as if he had just realised she was no longer a child, and asked her wistfully if she would like to go. And she without a thought had told the truth—namely

that she would love it. Then had come doubts. The last three days, filled up as they had been by the absolute adulation of the two young men had brought her a curious, innate, but till then dormant, sense that there were things which girls ought not to do. And having, much against her will, admitted this to herself, she became sternly scrupulous.

Ought she, or ought she not to go alone with Lord Blackborough in the motor? She knitted her brows over the problem, telling herself the while that she hated the world and every one in it. Then Lord Blackborough—he had an uncomfortable habit of reading her thoughts which she bitterly resented — had suggested Martha. And now Martha would not come. It was all such silly nonsense!

Ned Blackborough, watching her troubled face, felt that he could then and there have put his arms round her, kissed her even against her will and carried her right away from everything and everybody; from all conventionalities and princes and powers. She was a perpetual temptation to him to cast aside what few moorings he had. He was a man and she the one and only woman in the whole wide world; and he wanted her.

It was a headlong, purely emotional desire from which —curiously enough it struck him—passion was almost entirely absent. In a way, despite his greater reserve, there was more of passion in Ted's rational, straightforward, more normal love.

The very emotionality of Ned's feeling, however, carried with it content and certainty; for he felt that nothing in heaven or earth could dim the halo of flame and fire in which he stood beside her.

So he could afford to be magnanimous. "Then you had better take the fourth seat, Ted!" he said carelessly, looking to where the latter, his hands in his pockets, was glooming out of the window at the motor which could just be seen waiting through the bare branches across the drawbridge.

He had already had a casual invitation for himself

and his cycle thrown at him, he felt, like a bone to a dog. But he had refused it. Pleasant work, indeed, riding in the dusty wake of a rival who was abducting the girl you loved at the rate of five-and-twenty miles an hour in a Panhard.

From every point of view he had decided it would be wiser to stop at home, possess his soul in patience, and keep Aura's grandfather in a good humour. For the more he saw of Aura the more he realised that her choice was likely to follow the lead of her environment. He was very clear-sighted, very much in earnest. The unconventionality of the position irked him, and he heartily wished that he could quarrel with Ned, or even huff him—as people always did on these occasions. But that was out of the question; he was bound to be friendly and fight for the girl fairly. Yet, being what he was, a man with a natural gift for business, he could not help drawing up his prospectus, as it were, and counting up all his available assets. His love had nothing of Ned's impetuosity about it, so with all his real passion for Aura he soon realised that it was wise not to show it too much.

It frightened her. The brotherly tack ensured quicker confidence. And, of course, Sylvanus Smith's liking for him was a great point in his favour. Regarding this, he did not feel in any way mean, for he himself liked the old fellow, and found his somewhat antiquated talk interesting.

But this later offer of Ned's was another thing; he looked round and accepted it heartily, feeling, however, as he often did when he looked at Ned's face, a trifle of a sneak; for he was fighting impulse with strategy, and he felt convinced that he was right in doing so.

He was, nevertheless, in danger of forgetting his rôle when Aura made her appearance dressed for her drive. She had a little conscious flush in her face, the result of having for the first time in her life tried on and rejected various articles of attire. So far as the dress and coat went, she had no choice. Her method of life made wash-

ing dresses a necessity; and for winter white was the only colour which would survive Martha's vigorous washing. So her serge, toned to a decided cream by those same efforts after cleanliness, was unalterable, and the furs she had found in the boxes of outworn apparel, which her grandfather had handed over to her on her sixteenth birthday, were also a permanent asset. She had no notion of their worth—she supposed they were sable; she knew that when the darker longer hairs blew aside the inner fluff was exactly the bronze hue of her hair. It was her head-covering which troubled her. She tried a scarlet Tam-o'-Shanter but flung it aside. The contrast was too great. A white one followed suit. There was something wrong; she knew not what. Finally a bronze, brown-specked one made a faint curve come to her lips. It matched the fur, and somehow, her face. Then she lingered with a half-shamed look by the chest-of-drawers. Should she? Should she not? She might at any rate take something in case; so she stuffed a long, fine lace scarf into her muff and ran hastily downstairs.

Her advent brought a sort of breathlessness to the two young men. Ned evaded it by saying prosaically, "You'll have to tie on your head with something, I expect."

"I have got something," replied Aura superbly, and out came the lace scarf. It was bewildering. All the more so when Mr. Sylvanus Smith, looking at her with that same wistful affection, said half to himself, "Your grandmother wore that, my dear, when she was married."

But there was no time for sentimentalities. Here was a young girl, instinct with vitality to her very finger tips, going out for her first ride on a motor, going out for her very first experience of the world.

"I have never been further than this before," she said, heaving a great sigh of content, as the car, turning almost at right angles, sped over a bridge and curved towards the further side of the estuary. "Everything now is new! Everything! I've never even seen the hills

this shape before. And how strange our side of the valley looks. Who would believe that was Cwmfairnog? I don't believe I belong to it a bit."

She pointed to a pale blue shadow among the shining hills showing where the little valley sank to restful, sheltered peace.

"I'm sure you don't," echoed Ned joyously. "Only I don't quite know where we belong to—unless it is everywhere."

The "we" smote on Ted's ears disagreeably as he leant over from the back between them, while the *chauffeur*, honest man, sat immovable in his corner as if he saw and heard nothing.

"You belong to us at present," he said laughing; "so take care you don't smash us up, Ned—we can't afford to lose her."

She laughed back at him carelessly. That was exactly what she felt. She was having a splendid time with both of them.

It was a drive never to be forgotten. Down here by the sea the frost had slackened its hold, and in sheltered corners the grass was as green as at midsummer. A robin was singing its heart out on a bramble bough, where one pale flower showed rejoicing in the winter sunshine. It looked colder in the sky than it was on earth, for overhead a great white cloud drifted like an iceberg through a sea of palest blue—a frozen-looking, chilly blue.

"Is that Plas Afon? I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Aura, as a swift turn in the road brought them to a sheltered bay almost land-locked by a rocky promontory covered with trees. It needed but one glance at these to show you that here was art, not nature. But it was art mimicking Nature in her kindest moods and bringing together from the four corners of the earth the glories of eastern and western forests, of the south and of the north. A few gold leaves still lingered on the Spanish chestnuts, the blue of the noble pine formed a background for the golden-barked willow, the silver cedar threw out its long

arms across a scarlet oak, and almost to the water's edge grew rare conifers and blossoming shrubs.

"I believe you are afraid! I am," said Ned, steering for the portico.

"Who's afraid?" laughed Ted from the back seat, his eyes on the girl. "Not you or I, I'll bet. We sit free of this sort of thing. Keep your responsibilities to yourself, Ned!"

Once more Aura looked back at him and smiled brilliantly. She was not afraid, but she felt oppressed. Yet how lovely it was! A velvet lawn sloping away to the sea. Those unknown beautiful trees, each standing sentinel over a portion of God's earth, and in the sheltered nooks groups of tall grasses and hardy palms. Not a dead leaf, every tuft of herbage in its right place. And the gravel! Aura had never dreamt of such gravel before! Each pebble round-polished, glowing, half-translucent in the sunshine, like an uncut gem. She felt she could scarcely dare to walk upon the pretty things.

And it was a beautiful house too; a real fairy palace. Yes! it was like a dream—a dream of great, of exceeding beauty. There was not a discordant note in it. The man of whom Ned had told her, who had built it, who had lavished a fortune on it, and had then died in far-away Italy, leaving it to fall into the hands of Philistines, must have had——. What must he have had! Ah! well, he must have been rather like Ned Blackborough himself. For Plas Afon fitted Ned somehow in its fineness, its elusiveness.

She turned her eyes to him, and flushed; for his were on hers, thinking how Plas Afon fitted her. And in truth it did; fitted her all the more for the flush, since she held her head higher, and followed him with a still lighter, freer step.

"I am so glad," said Helen Tressilian coming forward. "This is Miss Vyvyan; Aunt Em—this is Miss Aura Graham."

"Delighted, I'm sure," murmured a tall, stately, absolutely colourless lady, who was engaged in making la-

borious needle-point on a tiny piece of black lining about two inches square. A tiny reel of almost invisible thread, a miniature pair of scissors, were also held in her left hand. They formed her only individuality; for the rest she got up at the right time, ate her breakfast and made appropriate breakfast remarks, and so lived through her day doing as the rest of the world did. But these came down with her in the morning and went to bed with her at night, held always in her white be-ringed left hand. Perhaps she slept with them. Anyhow they were an integral part of her waking life. If any one, thinking to be agreeable, asked her how she was getting on, she would smile gently, indulgently, and say that of course such work took time.

Ned used to feel that it annihilated Time altogether, and could he have happened on it unprotected, would for a certainty have annihilated it. But it went with her everywhere—even in the motor.

"Something quite terrible has happened, Ned," went on Helen Tressilian—she had given one look at Aura and been satisfied—"but it can't be helped. The Smith-Biggs have motored over from Aberaron—and—and—they have brought Mr. Hirsch. I sent Dr. Ramsay out with them to show them the garden, but—but they'll have to stop to lunch."

"They're welcome," retorted Ned with irritation; "I shall lunch in the garden when they've left it. We"—he looked at Aura—"only eat the fruits of the earth, you know."

"It was your cousin who asked me to lunch," began Aura gravely, whereat Ned laughed.

"You have an appalling sense of duty," he replied. "But I give in to it. Now, as I see Hirsch and Co. coming across the lawn, if we slip out by the back we shall escape them till lunch-time anyhow."

Aura looked at him doubtfully. His responsibilities, which were beginning to weigh her down, seemed to affect him not at all.

"Are you going too, Mr. Cruttenden?" asked Helen,

noticing a certain hesitation on Ted's part. In truth he was undecided. He wanted to see Mr. Hirsch, and, at the same time, he wished to be with Aura. Of course he could see his chief after lunch; but supposing they did not stop to lunch?

So Ned Blackborough had the girl to himself. For a moment or two, as he led her round by the back way through thickets of rhododendrons, he felt triumphant, as a man does when he sees an opportunity before him. And then, then he forgot everything in pure delight at her eager face, in the joy of her enjoyment.

"It is the most beautiful place in the world," she cried at last, "and this is the most beautiful thing in it."

She was on her knees beside a tuft of red bronze Tyrolean saxifrage, out of whose close carpet of velvet the tiny silver-green scimitars of the *iris alata* curved round guarding its broad, purple-blue blossoms. For they were in the winter-garden now. Not one of those crystal palaces of palms and hot-water pipes which answer to that name in the minds of so many. No! This was a real garden, in full air, but tucked away from every breeze that blows in a cove giving on the sea. Among the rocks above the small cleft of sandy beach on which the tide lapped lazily, grew all the kindly green things innumerable which have learnt to do without the rest of winter sleep. The winding walks edged their narrow way through great tinted carpets of saxifrage and sedums, and many another sturdy-leaved coverer of bare earth. Bronze and sage and golden, brown and purple and grey, with a few blue blossoms on a creeping veronica, a few late primroses, a few early winter aconites. And through it, over all, was the fine scent of the winter heliotrope that clung to the crannies of the rocks or grew lush by the little stream, which, falling in tinkling cascades, slid along the sand into the sea. It was such a garden as every one with patience and care might have; which none but the very few take the trouble to plant. There was nothing in it to tell of wealth save an old stone sphinx jutting out by the steps which led to the tiny wedge of

beach, its plinth forming a sort of jetty, beside which a boat lay moored. That had the measureless calm of Egypt in its eyes as it stood, backed by the changeful sky, the changeful sea.

"I believe it sees me," added Aura, looking up from the broad open face of the flower, her own as open, as beautiful, "and it has never seen me before. That makes me feel less strange, here where everything is new—and strange. It seems to me I have seen more to-day than in all my life before. It is so curious——"

"What? To see new things?" he answered, smiling down at her. "Isn't that the only thing worth having in life—to be able to think when you wake, 'To-day something may come to me which never came before'—to feel a sort of perpetual annunciation——"

She stood up suddenly, measuring him with narrowed eyes.

"I do not understand," she began.

He shook his head. "Oh yes, you do. I'm sure of it. Sit down on the plinth there and I'll try and tell you what I mean."

So with the sphinx above her she sat and listened. It was not much he had to say. Only the half-whimsical half-serious thoughts of a man, who, almost without knowing it, had the seeing eye for the invisible, the hearing ear for the inarticulate, who felt, vaguely, that the best part of life lay beyond the boundary set to conscious life by the majority of men.

In formulated shape it was all new to her, but something in her, she knew not what, found it familiar, approved, and her face showed her approval, her interest.

"I see," she said slowly, "and the message is 'fear not.' I like that."

"Yes!" he replied absently, clasping his hands over one knee and leaning back against the plinth to watch a cormorant that was coming back from fishing beyond the bar, a solitary swift, black speck upon the blue. "It would be good if one could get at it. We risk life every day for what we call love or money, but we are in a blue

funk about the truth, because the truth is that neither love nor money—you know, don't you, that I am awfully, hideously rich? ''

'' Ted told me you were the richest man in England.''

'' The devil he did! '' laughed Ned. '' I beg your pardon, but that wasn't in the bond. Anyhow I'm beginning to feel as if I could with pleasure sell all that I have, and follow—something else.''

'' But you have no right,'' began Aura, '' you can't shirk your responsibilities.''

'' *Et tu, Brute,*'' he murmured pathetically, '' My dear creature! You haven't any idea how I loathe being rich. Money doesn't buy what I like—freedom. No! confound it, it is always getting in the way. There! '' he added resignedly as he rose, '' I told you so. There is that pampered, powdered beast of a footman whom I'm ruining body and soul by my ridiculous claims, coming to tell us lunch is ready. And—and we are enjoying ourselves.''

He looked at her as he held out his hand to help her to rise. She gave him hers frankly enough, but drew it away hastily as if something in the touch of his gave her offence, and a quick frown came to her face.

'' That has nothing to do with it,'' she replied austerely, '' You have no right to keep your guests waiting.''

'' If I had your sense of duty, I—I should kill that fellow,'' he remarked coolly, as the footman, stopping short at a respectful distance among the saxifrages, said in the tone of voice in which a congregation echoes the responses in church.

'' If you please, your lordship, luncheon is served.''

Aura looked grave for an instant, then she laughed. She was never white sure whether to take Ned Blackborough *aux grands sérieux* or not. She admired him, however, when, entering the dining-room, the glitter and clatter of silver, the chatter and laughter of the guests, and the consciousness that every one was looking at her to see who had made their host so late, gave her a desire to run away. He was so easy, so self-possessed, withal so

clearly determined not to let any one interfere with his plan, which was apparently to sit beside her.

"I beg your pardon, Helen," he said cheerfully, "Miss Graham and I were in the winter garden. Will you sit here, Miss Graham. Ah! Lady Smith-Biggs, so glad you've come, and how is Sir Joseph? Don't let me disturb you, Ramsay. You fill the place better than I should. Is there room for me by you, Aunt Em? Hullo, where's Hirsch?"

This, as he circled the table brought him to a vacant seat beside Aunt Em; but also next to Aura to whom he said in an undertone, "They'll hand you things you can eat."

The butler's introduction of an elaborate silver dish with the mystic whisper, "Brown bread and butter cutlets," emphasised the remark, and she helped herself decorously with a spoon and fork.

"Mr. Hirsch and Mr. Cruttenden went off smoking somewhere," replied Helen, "Ah! here they come at last."

"My dear Mrs. Tressilian," exploded Mr. Hirsch in his strident voice, "I am overwhelmed, but when one gets to talking about money——"

"There is always the devil to pay, Hirsch," put in Ned.

"Ah! my dear Blackborough, *wie gehts*. What an entrancing place. Why don't you buy it?"

"It is not for sale," replied Ned, "and it's quite enough to hire it, I assure you, Hirsch."

Mr. Hirsch laughed in his loud unfettered fashion.

"Ah! my dear Blackborough, you always pay too much for everything. You are the sellers' natural prey."

Aura who had helped herself out of another silver dish to something which the butler called *fraises a la creme en caisses*, because it looked to her like strawberries and cream, gave a quick glance at Ned.

Paid for; yes, of course, everything must have been paid for. In an instant all her pleasure became transmuted to gold. The very strawberries—strawberries at

Christmas! What must they not have cost? And they had been got for her. She felt, hotly, as if she were being bribed.

"If you will finish your lunch," came Ned's voice in an undertone, "we can start back as soon afterwards as you choose. Yes! Hirsch," he added out loud, "I know I'm done all round. But it amuses people, and it doesn't hurt me. The only use of money is to get rid of it."

"I never, Mrs. Tressilian," protested Lady Smith-Biggs plaintively, "quite understand what your cousin means."

"I don't wonder," replied Helen soothingly, then smiled to herself, for, in truth, the lady in question seldom understood anything, but, being the wife of a conservative manufacturer who stood for his native town, thought it her duty to take an interest in social and political questions. "Ned loves paradoxes, but he really hates being cheated as much as any one."

"I only meant, Lady Smith-Biggs," put in Lord Blackborough, gravely, "that I am quite willing to subscribe—as I am sure Sir Joseph does—to all the great truths which underlie our commercial prosperity. That is to say, first, that everything is worth what it will fetch, and a trifle more for underhand percentages. Secondly, that nothing can be called cheating in an open market. Thirdly, that truth is the affair of the purchaser, or his creator."

"Bah! my dear Lord Blackborough," laughed Mr. Hirsch, "you would have a world without money; it would be a pretty paradise."

"But," protested Lady Smith-Biggs again, her diamond ear-rings twinkling—they were so magnificent that they made one forget the redness and the fatness of the face against which they shone, "I really do not understand. If you have no money, how can you pay your bills?"

"I pay mine by cheque," remarked Ned with a side-glance at Aura. After her sudden desire to escape which his aside had checked, she had become amused, then in-

terested, by the conversation. And now his allusion made her flush up, then smile, for she was beginning to realise that this curious world, in which money played so important a part, was really the world in which she had always lived. She had not seen the token; that was all.

"But, my dear Ned," said Miss Vyvyan placidly, "you can't pay everything by cheque. The bank doesn't like cashing small sums. I know when I send for my thread to Honiton—I have to send there, you know, it is so fine," she explained to Lady Smith-Biggs, laying her hand on the tiny black roll which, as usual, was beside her plate, "I always have to send a postal order."

"Exactly so," breathed Lady Smith-Briggs with a sigh of relief; "so you are wrong, Lord Blackborough. Why! even the very children have pennies. I used to think it rather dreadful their doing so much shopping for their mothers, but Sir Joseph says you cannot train them too early to understand the real value of money. And I am sure he is right, for it is quite impossible to live without it."

"That is a question which we ought to refer to Miss Graham," remarked Ned Blackborough coolly, "I believe she has never even seen a sixpence."

If a bomb had fallen on the lunch-table it could not have produced a greater effect. Mr. Hirsch sat petrified, his fork halfway to his mouth. All eyes were turned on Aura, who bore the brunt with smiles, for there was something of pure mischief in her host's face which was infectious. Even Ted, over the way, waited, amused.

"I believe she did, once, see a sovereign," continued Ned. "Perhaps she will tell you what she did with it."

The girl's face dimpled with laughter. "I gave it to the cockatoo."

Dynamite could not possibly have been more disconcerting.

"The cockatoo!" echoed Mr. Hirsch automatically, as, becoming aware that the *sole au vin blanc* on his fork was dripping on to his waistcoat, he dabbed blindly at the spot with his napkin. "And—and may I ask, my

dear young lady, what—what the cockatoo did with it?"

"He wouldn't eat it," said Aura.

"And so," interrupted Ted rather viciously, "it was thrown into the stream."

Aura turned swiftly on Ned. This was news. "Did you?" she began.

"So there it lies," remarked Ned, "as the beginning of a Welsh gold-mine. Make a prospectus out of that, Hirsch; it would be as true as most of them, I expect."

"But I do not quite understand," protested Lady Smith-Biggs once more, her pale blue eyes fixed vacantly on Aura. "What! you have never seen a sixpence—how—how dreadful!"

"That is easily remedied," remarked Peter Ramsay; "I believe I have so much in my pocket, anyhow."

"Stay a bit, Ramsay," said Lord Blackborough; "Miss Graham's ignorance is not confined to sixpence. She is generally unacquainted with the coin of the realm."

Mr. Hirsch's eyes were almost starting out of his head, partly in admiration of the girl whom he now discovered to be exceedingly beautiful. "Gott in Himmel!" he muttered, "I believe I have half a crown an' two shillings."

"Capital!" cried Ned. "Simmonds, take the plate round, and then bring it to Miss Graham."

"Admirable! Admirable! Blackborough, *mon cher*! You have imagination!" exploded Mr. Hirsch, fumbling excitedly in his pockets. "What luck! I have a two-florin bit, and I swore at them when they gave it me! Ah! young lady! one does not often meet one so old—a thousand pardons, mademoiselle, but at your age one need not be so afraid." His good-natured face was brimful of kindliness and honest enjoyment, and Aura responded to it.

"You needn't be in the least afraid," she smiled, "I shall be twenty-one on New Year's Day."

The information was welcome to at least two of the

party, and the others, carried away out of the conventional for the time, applauded the confidence.

"Soh!" exclaimed Mr. Hirsch, who was now busy with coins and a silver salver, while the butler and two footmen stood behind him sniggering. "Aha! young lady, you began a new era; ah! we must all send you a—what do you call *étrennes* in English to commemorate this extraordinary—Mein Gott! Has any one a threepenny bit?"

So with much laughter, Lady Smith-Biggs absolutely contributing from a very small purse a whole five-shilling piece, a complete set of coins was handed to Aura.

"With the company's compliments, Miss," said the butler.

"That ends your hours of innocence, Miss Graham," remarked Ned Blackborough gravely, as the ladies left the room.

It did not end Aura's ordeal, however, for, once in the drawing-room, Lady Smith-Biggs begged to be introduced in form.

"Oh! I am sorry," said Aura innocently, reaching up to the good lady's outstretched waggling hand; "but I always shake hands lower down. Is that the right way?"

The question verged on the impossible, since Lady Smith-Biggs lived in the highest circles. But she ignored it, and all her good breeding did not prevent her descending on the girl with a perfect cataract of questions. Where did she live, who was her father, had she any brothers or sisters?

Aura began to grow restive.

"No!" she replied shortly; then fearing she had been too incisive, added, "I have often wished I had. I should have liked them."

Helen Tressilian coming to the rescue looked at her with soft approving eyes. "They would have liked you, I'm sure. I expect you are very fond of children."

The girl turned to her impulsively. "Yes—very! You don't know how often I've wished that I had a baby."

It was worse than the sixpence. Lady Smith-Biggs gasped.

Her matronly breast heaved. She cast a nervous glance towards her daughter, who was providentially occupied in looking at Miss Vyvyan's lace-work.

"My dear," she said majestically, "you haven't a mother, so you'll excuse me telling you that we don't say that sort of thing in society."

Aura blushed a furious red.

"Why not?" she asked, and her voice had a militant ring in it.

"O Ned, Ned!" whispered Helen Tressilian to her cousin, as at that moment the gentleman entered the room, "for Heaven's sake take her away from us soon or she will be spoilt!"

He grasped the situation in a moment. "I'm afraid we must be starting, Miss Graham. We are going to row you across the estuary, and then we can walk home over the hills. You have never been in a boat, have you?"

"No!" said poor Aura, suddenly feeling inclined to cry. It seemed to her as if she knew nothing and had seen nothing.

CHAPTER XIV

PETER RAMSAY had come down to spend the Christmas holidays at Plas Afon in a very bad temper, both with himself and his world.

He was perfectly aware that he had been over-hasty in his struggle with vested interests, but what irritated him most of all was the knowledge that he had, as it were, cut the ground from under his own feet, so that further fighting was impossible. He could, of course, go over to Vienna, and learn a great deal under Pagenheim; but he would only have to come home again and begin where he had left off; which was silly—intensely silly! There are few things more annoying than the knowledge that you have given yourself away needlessly, and that a very slight application of a drag might have prevented the apple-cart from being overturned. The whole affair seemed now almost childish in its crudity. What the deuce did it matter whether a hogshead or a pint of beer were drunk, or if one patient the more died, instead of living to die in due time of something worse!

He was glooming out of the window over such thoughts as these when Helen, after seeing Lady Smith-Biggs start —despite her lunch—in a terrible fuss lest she should be too late for tea, came back to the drawing-room. Aunt Em, as always, had discreetly retired to her room, whether for work or sleep none knew, so they were alone. It was for the first time, and Helen seized her opportunity, for she had something she wished to say to him. So she crossed to where he stood, his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets.

"Ned tells me you have made up your mind to Vienna," she said kindly. There was a sort of forlornness

about this strong, capable man which always touched her.

"I have, Mrs. Tressilian," he replied somewhat defiantly. "I shall go to Pagenheim, and find out—things."

She smiled. "And come back, I suppose, to give No. 36 in the Queen's ward a chance of life?"

"If any one will provide me with a private hospital meanwhile, Mrs. Tressilian," he answered, "for I don't see my way to it otherwise."

She flushed a little eagerly, as if the conversation were taking the turn she had desired.

"I am so glad you say that, Dr. Ramsay," she replied, "for it helps me to say something. You know I have left the hospital—at least I am not going back. Now I have to live somewhere; where matters little. And—despite what you thought once—I am quite a decent nurse; a good one if—if I am keenly interested. If I were to take a small house outside Blackborough—or anywhere else—and—and make a regular surgical ward out of one room, would you—would you try that operation?"

He stared at her. "But why on earth——" he began.

"For many reasons!" she interrupted hastily. "Chiefly because I confess to feeling a responsibility."

"Or my lack of it!" he put in dryly. "I'm afraid not, Mrs. Tressilian; it would cost too much. To be frank—you haven't the money, neither have I."

"Money!" she echoed, a trifle scornfully. "Oh! it isn't a question of money. Ned would find that. I have spoken to him, and he is quite ready to help."

Peter Ramsay became very stiff. "That is extremely kind of him, and it is extremely kind of you also——"

"I am only thinking of No. 36," she interpolated warningly.

"I am perfectly aware of that fact," he replied; "but may I remind you of another—that No. 36 is only one out of, say, a million who are very possibly better dead and out of the way? My cutting him about might be a selfish pleasure; my duty might be—euthanasia!"

She looked at him vexedly. "I do not dictate to you

a doctor's duty,'' she said with spirit, '' but I know that a nurse's is ' to save life and defy death at all costs.' Have I got that quite pat? ''

He smiled. '' You have an excellent memory, Mrs. Tressilian,'' he replied, '' and—and I am grateful for the suggestion, but it is quite out of the question. Perhaps when I return from Vienna I may be able to—to do my duty. At present I ought to be starting for my walk over the hills. Lord Blackborough has promised to pick me up at Dinas—the motor is to meet him there—and as this is my last day——''

'' Are you leaving us to-morrow? '' she asked quickly.

For an instant he felt inclined to confess that he had had no previous intention of departing before the New Year, but he swallowed his vexation at his own hasty decision, and said rather lamely, '' I am afraid I must—I ought just to give a look round the London hospitals before I go abroad.''

'' I suppose it would be better,'' she assented sarcastically. '' I have always understood that they are really not bad.''

'' Except for the beer,'' he answered coolly, and left her.

But though it was easy enough to dismiss Helen and her suggestions in this cavalier fashion, he could not dismiss a feeling of irritation at her implied disapproval. The faintest hint of it always roused resentment in him and a desire to make that disapproval utterly unreasonable. So, as he breasted the hills, intending to walk over their summits, and when time was up drop down on Dinas and the motor, his thoughts were busy with the possibility of fitting in No. 36 in the Queen's ward with his plans for the future.

There was always the hidden hundred pounds—if it still existed! He had a great mind to see if it did, since he was so close to its hiding-place.

Would he have time? He looked at his watch, and then gave a glance seaward. The estuary, now at flood tide, lay silver in the winter sunshine, and not more than

halfway across it he could discern a slowly-moving black speck. The boat, of course. If that were so, he would have ample time, and for a smoke also. He sat down, and watched the small black speck, wondering what had delayed those three. It seemed to be going faster now; but even so, there was time and to spare. An hour and a half at least ere they could possibly crest those further hills and drop down into the valley. And then—then, by the computation of experience, it would be at least an hour ere Ned Blackborough would tear himself away!

Peter Ramsay had rather a contempt for love. It was to him a physiological disease, the violence of which argued a lack of self-control. And the beautiful girl who had never seen a sixpence, though very charming, appeared to him to be a most unsuitable wife for any man. For his idea of a wife was distinctly some one who could comfort and coddle, and—without open words—prevent one from making an ass of oneself.

Yes! he had made an ass of himself; but, concerning No. 36, there was no reason why he should not take his own way. After all, there was nothing but life. The metaphysicians would put thought first, but it was "*Ergo sum, cogito,*" not the converse—at any rate to common-sense.

Nothing was susceptible to absolute proof except life and death, and they probably were mere conditions of matter.

As he looked out, the light waves from the faintly declining sun were turning the invisible vapour about the higher hills into a filmy mist-veil which seemed to hang between him and the distant view. His eye seemed to detect in it a ceaseless shimmer, an almost imperceptible vibration.

That was it, truly! The motes in a sunbeam—even he himself for that matter—were but transient aggregations of the atoms in their unending dance of life and death. What would they hive into, like swarming bees? A man or a mouse—who could tell? Only the master of the ceremonies in this dance macabre. So the question of life

or death was already settled for No. 36, though, so far as he—Peter Ramsay—was concerned, it depended on the existence or non-existence of that miserable pittance of a hundred pounds. But all the sanctions, all the mental and moral backings of humanity, depended on something which could not be proved to exist.

He rose with a shrug of the shoulders, put out his pipe, and started on again. Life or death seemed to him to hang on that hundred pounds. He did not much care which; the odds were distinctly on death.

As he turned ere dipping down into the valley which lay between him and the gap, he gave a last look at the silver shield of the estuary. The boat must have reached the shelter of the further shadow—unless it had gone down! Life and Death—Death and Life! An even balance, despite the surgeon's skill; despite even money.

As a matter of fact, the boat had at last reached the opposite shore, and Ned Blackborough, feeling savage with himself and Fate, was standing by holding the rope taut, while Ted, visibly triumphant, was lifting Aura bodily from the boat across the intervening yards of slush and seaweed.

He set her down gently with a frank "That's all right," and she, looking up at him, smiled her thanks.

"I'm so sorry you hurt your arm," she said to Ned rather condescendingly. "It is lucky Ted could row so well, isn't it?"

"Very lucky," replied Ned, feeling aggrieved. He had gone on pulling against that miscounted tide till he positively could no more, and even now the pain of his ill-mended arm made him feel almost sick. He had been forced to give in, and though Ted had been perfectly within his rights in failing to let Aura know that the disability was—well! not absolutely blameworthy—he need not have sculled so confoundedly well.

He had been a picture to look at, bending easily to the long stroke while Ned was idly steering.

"We had better take the Crudel valley," said the latter as a bye-path showed up a lonely glen; "it isn't half

as pretty as this, but it is shorter, and we haven't much time. I delayed you horribly.''

Aura smiled tolerantly. '' But we came along splendidly afterwards, didn't we? ''

'' You know this country awfully well,'' remarked Ted, feeling the urgent need of generosity. '' I haven't an idea where we are.''

But Ned was in no humour for patronage.

'' I happen to hold the mineral rights of the Crudel valley in rather a queer, roundabout way,'' he replied. '' They went with a property my uncle had bought in Shropshire—but that is beside the point. Naturally, with all the fuss there has been about the slate quarries lately, I have had to know something as to the lie of the land. When we first met, I was down to see it, so there is nothing wonderful in my knowledge.''

Ted stared at him. '' By George! Then it is you who put a spoke in the wheel of that new company? ''

Aura looked at him also, and with quick disapproval. '' Is it you who have thrown all the people out of work? '' she asked. '' Do you know some of the children haven't enough to eat,—at least,'' she added, her look having brought her, she scarcely knew why, a vague doubt, '' Martha told me that the people were getting up a subscription for them.''

Ned laughed derisively and shrugged his shoulders.

'' You won't understand what I mean, but there is a general election due next year. The men have had other employment offered them; if they won't accept it, that is their own fault.''

'' But I don't understand your objection——'' began Ted.

'' Don't you? '' interrupted Lord Blackborough. '' I think that must be because you don't know good slate from bad.''

They had passed on by this time into that most desolate of all places on God's earth, a valley of unworked slate quarries, a valley desecrated by man's needs, yet needed not by man. Seamed, scarred, riven until scarcely

a blade of gracious grass remained on what had once been soft, sweet sheep-bite set with heather, shadowed by dense bracken thickets. Great moraines of débris, not rounded by long æons of slow yet certain grinding in the mill of God, but fresh, crude, angled, from the hand of man, usurped the valley now on this side, now on that, turning the very roadway, bordered by rusty rails, to their pleasure. A mountain stream, released from long slavery, sped—exultantly free—past the low congeries of differently pitched roofs supported by iron pilasters, beneath which cogwheels and bands, levers and distributors stood unmovable, rusted into silence. Hanging halfway up a stiff incline of shale, an empty truck hung rusted to the rails. Another, full of split slate squared, holed, ready for homestead or granary, stood in the wide stacking-yard where thousands and thousands of these same leaves of slate, looking like huge books, were ranged in orderly piles. How many homes, how many churches, how many barns and factories might not have been roofed in by these piles waiting idly?

For what? For money.

Ned Blackborough stooped down and picked up a slate which had fallen on the truck-way. It snapped between his fingers, and with a laugh he flung it aside.

"Bad stuff!" he said, "and that is better than most. I tell you that this valley, which is a valley of desolation now, has been a valley of dishonesty from the very beginning."

His eyes seemed to catch fire, and he turned to Ted almost threateningly, "And you don't understand! Will you understand, I wonder, when I tell you that these quarries, like many another, have been in the hands of speculators from the very beginning? Some one who knew the slate was bad took to himself others who knew it also, and between them they floated a company. When the money had gone, some other rascal bought the bankrupt stock and started another company, and another, and another. And all the time, these workmen whom you commiserate were hewing and splitting and taking their

wages, for what? For money, only for money! What was it to them that the slate was bad, that their labour was wasted and vain? They got their money. And now they wonder because, when the lease of the last company was up, I stepped in and said 'No.' This sham shan't go on. I claim my right, and I won't be bribed by anybody.'' He spoke almost passionately, then laughed, and, with a brief "I beg your pardon; these things irritate me,'' struck up a shady footpath which led over the hill.

"I don't exactly see how it could have been done,'' remarked Ted argumentatively. "If they went bankrupt they must have had a valuator, and then——''

"I've no doubt they had,'' broke in Ned impatiently, "but what I tell you is the long and short of it.''

"Besides, I don't consider the workman is to be blamed at all,'' argued Ted. "So long as he does his work fairly and gets his pay for doing that work, no one has a right to find fault with him. Then think of the women and children.''

Aura, whose face had grown keen over the discussion, looked swiftly at Ned, awaiting his answer. He, in one of his worst moods, gave it unhesitatingly: "My dear fellow, what is the use of breeding up a race of thieves and swindlers? ''

With that he bent himself to take the hill at a gallop, leaving those two agreeing as to the women and children, agreeing also in a thousand superficial likings and dislikings born of youth, high spirits, and no small lack of thought.

But at a sharp turn amid the tumbled débris, they overtook Lord Blackborough opposed to a small boy seated disconsolately on the ground in a puddle of fresh milk, dotted with the remains of a broken jug, while an ill-looking collie dog yapped from the shelter of a more than usually large block of worthless slate.

"It wasn't my fault,'' explained Ned ruefully. "That brute of a dog upset him, trying to bark and run away at the same time.''

The small boy, having now realised his misfortune, was blubbering in Welsh.

"I don't understand what he is saying," said Aura, looking up at Ted, after bending over the urchin with English consolation. "Do you?"

He shook his head. "That is the worst of wild Wales; one can't be compassionate."

Ned looked at them a trifle contemptuously.

"He's afraid. A boy never blubbers like that without cause, and he isn't hurt. Here, you!" he continued, hauling the child up incontinently, "don't howl. I go with you home—*catre*—do you understand?—*catre*—*mam*."

With which Welsh smattering, he dragged up the unwilling boy, still blubbering, towards a group of slate cottages which showed a few hundred yards away. Such desolate-looking cottages, only to be differentiated by their straight lines from the masses of débris about them.

"You go on," he called back. "It's straight over the brow of the hill, and then you can see. I'll pick you up in no time."

But when they looked back from the summit, there was no trace of him on the upward path.

"There is no use waiting," said Ted oracularly. "By George! what a relief this is."

He spoke in glad confidence as his eye travelled over God's good world untouched, undefiled, and yet in his heart of hearts he would not have scrupled at any desecration of Nature, provided it were in pursuit of gold.

Nevertheless, he responded at once to the fresh, bright breeze on the wide, undulating hill-tops, and the free, glad joy in life itself as life, came to him as they passed with springy step over grass-land and bog-land, all a-crackle with faint frost. What did they talk about? Not love, certainly—he was too wise for that—though love lay at the bottom of all his thoughts.

"How your hand trembles," she said laughingly, as he held hers in crossing a brook.

He flushed a little. "We've been going such a rate,"

he replied. "You're the best walker I know, for a girl."

There was something in the qualification which set her at her ease.

"I wonder what has become of Ned?" she said once, as they finally turned into the home valley and saw beneath them, spread out like a map, the familiar fields, the sloping lawn, the straight walks of the garden, the cosy, comfortable-looking chimneys all asmoke.

Ted pointed to the sky-line above them, where for an instant a dark something, which might have been a sheep, and might have been a man, showed, then disappeared.

"Up in the clouds, as usual," he laughed. "Ned is an awfully good chap, but I wish he wasn't quite so balloony."

Aura looked at him distastefully. "I like him best when he is in the clouds," she said firmly. "Of course," here she became slightly reflective, "I dare say his being so—so erratic, might put one out a good deal, and people like you would be more satisfactory to deal with; still—" here she dimpled all over—"come! let us race down the hill, and then we can be waiting tea for him when he turns up."

But there was no tea ready when Ned, whose ill humour had passed with his solitary walk, arrived.

"Thank Heaven!" cried Ted, who met him at the door. "Will you, like a good fellow, fetch the doctor; he lives beyond the hill? Mr. Smith is ill, as he was before. You can take the motor, can't you, from Dinas?"

"No need; Ramsay will be there. I'll be back in no time," was the reply.

So while Ted helped Martha with his experience and comforted Aura as best he could, thereinafter remaining to give Peter Ramsay a hand in getting the old man to bed, Ned kicked his heels in the drawing-room. Sickness, with its possibility of death, always made him a little disdainful, and he had but a few stereotyped words of regret when, the crisis having passed, the three came in, Aura looking pale and troubled.

"Was he as ill before?" she asked, her eyes seeking Ted's almost reproachfully.

Ted's sought the doctor's. "Not quite," replied the latter. "These attacks—it is as well to be prepared for them, Miss Graham—tend to become more serious. He may not, I hope he will not, have another for a long time, but you must try and avoid any excitement." He held out his hand to say good-bye. "There's no reason to be alarmed, I assure you; with care, he may not have another for—for months."

He clasped the girl's hand with strong, steady grip and smiled, but poor Aura, facing the one great reality for the first time, stood white and silent. Only when they had gone, she turned to Ted.

"I don't know what I should have done without you," she said gratefully.

Outside, as the motor disappeared in the darkness, Dr. Ramsay was saying nearly the same thing.

"It is lucky Cruttenden was there and had an idea of what to do; lucky too that I didn't give you up and go home."

"Sorry," responded Ned shortly. "Hope you had a good walk."

"Excellent," replied Peter Ramsay with a little laugh. "I satisfied myself that hills and dales, and the round world generally, were mere manifestations of matter, and the Providence didn't shape my steps anyhow."

CHAPTER XV

SINCE the night on which poor Morris Pugh had sought in vain for God's Providence upon the mountain-top, he had not left his room; for rheumatic fever—that curse of Wales—had laid hold of him.

The mental shock also militated against recovery. It would be almost impossible to overestimate what that shock had been, surcharged as he was by religious exaltation. He had been dashed from high heaven to earth, and at first he lay stunned, absolutely maimed. Then, as feeling returned to his numb mind, the desire to slip away and so avoid the necessity for thought was the despair of his mother, who had come from the lonely hill-farm, where she still was mistress, to be his devoted nurse. She was a woman of the true saintly type, full to the brim of sympathies and sentimentalities; as such, not one to be burdened with the reality of doubt.

By degrees, however, chaos became order. The fiat, "Let there be light," went forth, and Morris Pugh, enthusiast by nature, began to creep towards it. What although the so-called miracles in which he and many others had believed were unreal, that could not be said of the effects of the revival. They were everywhere manifest, abundantly real. Thousands hitherto spiritually blind were now with open eyes following the straight and narrow way. Oh! there was proof enough to show what Power was at work. As the Reverend Hwfa Williams had said (he found such small jests no inconsiderable aid in his rough and ready missioning), there was proof enough for every Thomas in Wales.

And there was more work to be done; so what mattered it whether he, Morris Pugh, the man to do it, rose or did

not rise to the height of sublime folly which had been his once? There was work to be done and he must do it. So on the last day of the old year, after a week's change at Aberystwith, he returned, eager for the big revival meeting which was to see the New Year in. It was to be a great occasion, for Merv, Gwen, and Alicia Edwards were back for a Christmas holiday from their arduous labour abroad. Their presence in the little village must surely awaken the few sleepers that remained; these would be gathered in, their names added to the already long list of the elect. Even Myfanwy Jones who, as usual, had come down for a long week-end laden with bandboxes, might follow the example of her father and come into the ranks of the saved.

That would be great gain, for though Myfanwy, being well-to-do, might dress as she pleased, the influence of that dress was not benign on poorer girls. And there were so many points besides drunkenness and open immorality which the undoubted increase of faith did not seem to touch. David Morgan had sold his mare at Wrexham for five-and-twenty pounds. An open market truly, and it was a good-looking beast, for all that it had the staggers. Then the hole in the hedge, through which Evan Rees' sheep were in the habit of pushing their way to graze on a water-meadow belonging to an absentee proprietor, was still unmended.

There were, in fact, many things which to Morris Pugh's sobered sight seemed ill advised, while some, such as the midnight meetings held by mere lads and lassies, could not be defended.

All these things must be combated. But on this eve of a new step towards Eternity (that quaint Eternity which apparently has not yet begun for the religious) the work must be to rouse every dead soul to life.

The chapel was packed from floor to ceiling. Taken simply as a sight, it was marvellous to think of the sordid lives lived from year to year, begun, continued, and ended in the cult of the ultimate sixpence (by which alone the struggle for existence could be maintained)

that many of those present were leading; here, before the Lord, they were at least seeking a higher sanction.

And yet——

Morris Pugh's whole heart and soul went out in one vivid prayer for true guidance.

Gwen, on the platform, was looking dreadfully ill. She was wasted to a skeleton, her fever-bright eyes seemed larger than ever, but they were steadier, and her voice was even sweeter, despite the hollow hacking cough which assailed her at all times, save when she was singing.

Those same eyes of hers had learned the trick of fastening themselves on one face; but so had the eyes of all these practised missioners, and even Abel Parry, who was taking Hwfa Williams' part as bass, looked out steadily, earnestly.

Myfanwy Jones felt the thrill of this, though she was conscious that much of her physical sense of strain arose from the presence of Mervyn Pugh.

How very handsome he was, and what a gentleman he looked after his three months of touring about the country!

In truth he had changed. He was finer, more complex; for it had been impossible to lead the old simple village life in the hotels and boarding-houses where he had lodged. He was different in every way, and in becoming different he had almost forgotten his past self. Even the mental emotion of his first association with Gwen in this work of salvation had passed; he took it now as a matter of course. For the rest, seeing his way clear, and urged thereto by those who had heard him speak, he had almost made up his mind to the ministry.

Yet not quite so; and the sight of Myfanwy Jones robed in black samite, mystic, wonderful, in the very first row, roused recollections, almost regrets.

For there had been no harm in their holiday junketing at Blackborough; they had only enjoyed themselves immensely.

A sense of something electrical in the air disturbed him from recollections of a man in a music hall, who had ven-

tured to comment on his companion's beauty, and he became conscious that Gwen and Alicia Edwards were both looking at him. There was a whole world of difference in the meaning of these looks, but Mervyn lumped them together as a control to his wandering thoughts.

He need not have felt that sudden sense of guilt so far as poor Gwen was concerned. Her limited mind had long since relegated the stormy past to the Devil. She shuddered at the thought of it, as she shuddered at the thought of Him.

But Mervyn was a soul which, mysteriously, she had saved.

In a measure this was true. All unknown to herself, she was largely responsible for the outburst of spiritual energy around her. There was that in her which, given freely as she gave it, without measure and without stint, was bound to force response. And to-night, wearied utterly, yet elated, singing against the doctor's orders, racked by a terrible pain when she drew her breath, she was at the flood-tide of her potentiality; and she knew it.

Beside this—the joy and rapture of the stigmatic—Alicia Edwards' jealousy of Myfanwy was trivial indeed. But though much that was trivial lingered in the minds of many in the chapel, there was a deadly earnestness in most of the faces which looked up to the missioners, almost as they might have looked at a veritable transfiguration of their Lord.

The toilworn, the smug, the rugged, the sensuous, the clever, on all these lay a supreme desire, yet a supreme content. Briefly, they had what they wanted, yet they wanted something more. What?

An analysis of the minds of most would, no doubt, have yielded a large percentage of purely personal sense of salvation, but there was more than that in the whole atmosphere of the little chapel as Morris Pugh stood up to give his first address since his vigil upon the mountain. What it was, who can say? Call it the Spirit of God, call it anything you please, all explanations resolve themselves into a still further away, "What is it?"

Now, all those days and nights of mental and physical torture through which Morris Pugh had passed, had left their unfailing mark on him. Before he could even creep back into the old straight way, it had been necessary for him to acknowledge that he had been at fault in seeking to dictate to the Greater Wisdom, in looking for a sign, when no sign would be given. It had been a bitter struggle for him to lay down these, his highest hopes, but he had laid them down, and he stood before his people humbled, patient, almost wistful.

But they were not attuned to this mood; so as he spoke, the electricity—the *something*—in the air failed, and silence passed to faint shiftings, to louder shufflings. Practised speaker as he was, he realised at once that he was not, as usual, holding his audience. With an almost convulsive inward prayer for guidance, he modulated his voice into the bardic "hwl," that marvellous maker of emotion amongst the Welsh.

A cough? Yes! a distinct cough! followed by another and another!

Mervyn looked anxiously at his brother. This would never do! Experience told him that the unknown force on which the professional missioner relies was oozing away, so without more ado, he gave the signal to Gwen, and straightway a hymn, softly, persuasively, sung in the perfect harmony of four exquisite voices, arrested the wavering attention of the crowded chapel.

Emotionally musical to the *n*'th degree, the audience needed no more. In an instant the atmosphere changed and, as Morris Pugh resumed his seat, the waves of sweet sound seemed to stun him with a sense of failure.

Verse after verse, those waves grew to almost tumultuous chorus, seeming to monopolise with their vibration even the small amount of stifling air left to each pair of human lungs. So through that human chorus, half-drowned by the glad summons to Eternity, came the passing of Time as the church clock struck—

Twelve!!

The sound stilled the singing for a second, and Mervyn, a genius in emotion, seized on the propitious moment.

"Let us pray!" he cried, falling on his knees, "let us pray for our brothers and sisters who are still in bondage!"

Without an instant's hesitation the congregation of the elect followed suit, leaving the few standing, uncertain. Amongst them, Myfanwy Jones. Her face showed a sudden fear, not unmixed with resentment; but Mervyn had leapt from the platform and was beside her, his face brilliant, ere she could decide on either.

"Do not go!" he whispered passionately. "Listen! The door is open—we wait for you! we want you, Myfanwy!"

The girl turned to him. A faint tremor showed in her full, lithe figure; her lip trembled. Another moment and she would have given way, but that moment brought another factor to the equation of assent.

"Yes! We want you, Myfanwy! We wait for you!"

It was a girl's voice, and Myfanwy flashed round on it superbly self-possessed. "Thank you much, Alicia Edwards," she said in clear tones, "but there is no need for you to wait at all. I am going!"

And go she did, with her head held high, a sphinx-like calm of malice in her face, the *frou-frou* of her silken skirts heard above the sudden silence which fell upon the chapel.

It had needed but this example to make other hesitants follow. The congregation, taken aback, looked for guidance and got it from Gwen.

"I will not let thee go!" she chanted in still clearer, higher tones as she threw out her hands to those retreating souls. "Yea, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. Where thou goest I will go. Thy God shall be my God! Follow! Follow!"

The cry was caught up readily, as all her cries were, when as now, her nervous equilibrium was disturbed. So

on the heels of the retreating few, the many swept out into the chill, frost-bound moonlit night.

The utter peace of it, its cold indifference, disturbed by no questionings, struck like a knife to Morris Pugh's heart as he followed also, uncertain whether to accompany his flock on their midnight visitations, or go home to pray in secret for the salvation of sinners.

He chose the latter, and as he closed the door of his room the rousing chorus of a revival hymn echoed out under the stars of heaven, making him think sadly, how far away these were, for all their brightness.

They seemed so also to Aura, who at that moment—looking as if she might have stood as illustration to Keats' "St. Agnes' Eve"—was standing at her window in the moonlight. Four days had passed since her grandfather's sudden fainting fit, and he was quite himself again. He had even been able to see Mr. Hirsch, who had called in his motor; and Peter Ramsay, after delaying his departure a day or two, had left. There was nothing more to be feared for the present; and for the future, a peaceful, unemotional life was all that was required. So well, in fact, was he that Ted had obeyed an urgent summons from Mr. Hirsch, and, much against his will on this last night of the Old Year, had gone over to him at Aberafon. It was a bore, he felt; and yet the last few days of closer companionship with Aura, of her natural inevitable reliance on him, had made him leave her with a lighter heart.

"You will be sure and come home to-morrow," she had said, and the word "home" had brought a great tenderness in his reply, "Of course, I shall be sure."

She felt glad of the assurance as she stood there looking out on the hill-side, where everything in the midnight moonlight seemed as if carven out of stone; for her grandfather had been captious that evening, absolutely refusing to give up his annual habit of sitting up to see the New Year in. And he had been annoyed at Parkinson, the parlour-maid's, failure to appear, when, as the clock struck twelve, the personnel of the establish-

ment were expected to wish and be wished long life and prosperity.

"Gone to a revival meeting," he had echoed querulously, "a singularly inadequate excuse! She might have read her Bible at home; but I will speak to her tomorrow."

To which Martha had replied austerely, "It ain't no good speaken', sir; I've spoke till I'm dumb. And it ain't her Bible she's wantin', but 'er best 'at; for she's that frivolous at forty in the dry, as beats me wot she must 'a bin' in the green. An' Bate 'ud a' gone too—oh yes! yer wu'd Bate, so it ain't no good speakin'—only I told 'im plain. 'Bate,' says I, 'you know as you're a deal too light-'earted to go cadgin' about with a 'orse and cart when there's liquor 'andy, an' that ain't in it for temptation with a midnight meetin' with the likes o' her for company, as makes me sick to cook for 'em. An' what is the shine in them hot stuffy revivals beats me. I wouldn't go to one of 'em. No! Not if I was 'anged for it. I'd just say to the cart, Drive on!'"

The dramatic finale had made Aura laugh. She smiled at the remembrance of it now; but then she smiled at the remembrance of many things in the last four days.

How kind the world had been to her!

A faint clatter in the back premises made her smile again. Martha must be waiting up till the light had gone from her room in order to play that ridiculous game with stockings on which Ned had insisted on this New Year's Day, which was her birthday also.

Oh! How kind they had all been. She could not spare one of them.

She blew out the light, and the pulsing of the stars seemed to find an echo in the pulsing of her heart. Suddenly she leant out to stretch her warm young hands into the frosty air, over the flower graves in the garden, over the whole wide glistening world.

"A Happy New Year to you all, dear people," she whispered. "Such a Happy New Year!"

Five minutes after, having smiled drowsily at the sound of Martha's stealthy footsteps outside her door, she was asleep, to wake again, however, as the birds wake in winter, long before the lingering dawn.

The moon was hanging like a silver shield before the window and sent a flood of light into the room, but far away in the east on the edge of the hill there was just that faint paling of the sky which tells that when the sun rises it will rise there.

Dawn or no dawn she was broad awake, and the next instant stood by her open door.

There was the stocking, crammed full, as Ned had threatened, with chocolate creams, and a pile of parcels on the floor. She picked them up, and putting them in the warm nest she had just left, began to undo them by the light of the moon. What had they given her, these kind people?

A white chiffon motor veil! That must be from Mrs. Tressilian, who had raised an outcry against a scarf of Mechlin being used to such shallow purpose. A silver ring tray, set round with every conceivable coin of the realm! She did not need the card slipped into the red morocco case to tell her this was from Mr. Hirsch. A book—her heart gave an answering throb to the starshine—was from Ted. He had promised her a Shelley. And this, what was it? It must be the semi-surgical instrument for pruning roses, of which Dr. Ramsay had told her.

And that was all, for neither Martha nor her grandfather would give in to stockings.

Yes, it was all. Another half-ashamed feel over the darkling floor of the passage assured her of this, and she turned to the Shelley. Even if Ned had considered the chocolate creams sufficient, she had this. Now she could read the context to the lines which Ned—yes! it was Ned—had quoted:

> 'Time like a many-coloured glass
> Stains the white radiance of eternity.'

It was lighter at the window, she passed to it, and leaning the heavy volume on the sill, knelt down to search for the "Adonais."

But she turned no pages. For there, outside on the window-ledge, broad-faced, clear, open-eyed, an *iris alata* stared up at her from its carpet of saxifrage.

"*The most beautiful thing!*"

Yes! that was it—and *he* had given it to *her* . . .

The poetry which another man had written slipped to the floor unheeded. She was absorbed in what this man had brought her.

She knelt quite still for a time, her hands slightly clasped, feeling dazed at something in herself which responded—which gave back—what?

What was the over-mastering desire to crush the unconscious flower to death with her kisses.

She rose suddenly and began with haste to dress herself. She must climb the mountain-tops, as she so often did in the dawn light, and find some answer.

As she slipped silently through the house, she paused once or twice wondering if she heard something. No! her granfather's room was quite quiet; but once in the hall the sound became indubitable.

Some one was singing outside. Singing softly it is true, but still singing. The village children, no doubt; but they must be stopped—they must not disturb her grandfather.

The next instant she stood looking with amazed anger at a group of five people who, kneeling on the ground, were singing under their breath some wild Welsh hymn which rose and fell plaintively, persistently. One of these figures she recognised. It was the parlour-maid, Parkinson; this must, therefore, be the tail-end of the revival meeting, for she had heard that such visitations were not uncommon.

"Parkinson!" she called severely, her young blood in arms at the intrusion. "What are you doing there? Get up at once and go into the house."

Parkinson, whose prim face was blurred with tears,

whose hat was awry, whose whole appearance betokened a stormy night of emotion, made a protest that this was an appointed time.

"Yes!" retorted Aura, with a swift stamp of her foot, "the appointed time for doing your work! Go! and clean the silver—it wants it—you foolish woman—go!"

The foolish woman rose and sneaked away, leaving Aura to face the remaining enthusiasts who had combined the seeing of the new convert home with the singing of a hymn at this stronghold of the Devil.

Until he felt Aura's clear eyes upon him, Mervyn Pugh had not remembered the possibility of recognition. It may be, indeed, that he scarcely knew who the girl was whom he had once mistaken for Gwen. But now at her first glance he knew all too well.

"So it is you!" she said slowly, as he rose, and feeling that his best chance lay in boldness, faced her. "Why—why have you dared to come here?"

"To plead—to pray for you," he began, but was stopped by the fire, the scorn of her.

"You dare to pray for me—you—you coward! Yes! I called it you once. I call you it again. Coward! And you too, Gwen," she continued, for warned by something in the youthful accusing voice, Mervyn's fellow in the past had risen also, and with large fever-bright eyes was eagerly scanning their faces in the hope of understanding what her limited knowledge of English did not allow her to follow. Then suddenly the sight of the poor wasted body, the recognition of the poor distraught soul, overbore Aura's anger, and she stretched out her hands passionately, "Oh, Gwen! Gwen, my dear," she cried, "Go home and forget all this. Go home and lay flowers on your dead child's grave, and think of it and pray that he, its father, may be forgiven his cowardice."

A little startled cry came from Alicia Edwards. Abel Parry sang on ignorant of English.

Gwen looked at Aura, then at Mervyn, giving to each the same slow patient smile of forgetful forgiveness.

And then in that high piercingly sweet voice of hers, she began in its Welsh version the hymn which had heralded her spiritual mission:

> 'Just as I am, without one plea,
> Save that Thy blood was shed for me——'

She paused, arrested by a little soft cough. Then with a strange look in her wide wistful eyes she sank to her knees and stretched out her hands blindly, "Merve—Merve-fach—Merve anwl y——" The rest was lost in the gurgle of the blood which poured from her mouth.

Aura was beside her in a moment. "Don't raise her—her head on my knee so—Call Martha—you, man—don't stand gaping—And you, woman, unfasten her dress—that is better."

It seemed an interminable time, though Martha was already up and dressed, ere Aura saw her running from the back; and all that time, the stain on Aura's white dress grew larger and larger.

"Lord sakes," muttered Martha. "A blood vessel! This comes of making free and she not fit—Parkinson"—for the parlour-maid had followed—"you run for your turpentine, without the bees'-wax, there's a dear—you sit as you be Miss H'Aura, and you there, what's your name, them icicles. We must stop it—if we can."

There was an ominous ring in the last words, and it was not long ere Aura's face blanched almost as white as the one upon her lap, as she realized that if the life blood was slacking, it was because the tide of life itself was ebbing.

This was death. She had never stood close to it before. Her young eyes looked fearfully through the hush of life to the unknown.

So the minutes sped. Alicia Edwards gave a sigh of satisfaction, for the bleeding had ceased, but Aura, feeling the faint death tremor which re-unites the vibration of life to the vibration of the star-shine, looked up, her fear gone in grave wonder.

"I think," she said softly, "she is dead."

"Go you into the house, my darlin', an' change that there poor dress, I'll manage now," choked Martha, ever ready with her tears.

Aura looked down with a faint shiver at the crimson stain. So that was the end of love.

CHAPTER XVI

It was not more than six hours ago that Aura had looked at Ned's iris, had sat in the dawn with Gwen's head in her lap, yet it seemed to the girl who had never seen death before, who had never before realised what Love meant, as if whole æons had passed over her head. In truth they had; for Love and Death make up Life, since Birth comes to us without remembrance.

The morning had passed by in dizzy haste. There had been much to do, and do quickly, so that her grandfather should not be disturbed by even knowing of the tragedy. This was the more easy of compass, seeing that since his last seizure he had not been coming downstairs till late. So, ere he appeared, there had been time for folk to come and go, time even for old Adam to rake over the gravel disturbed by so many feet. There was no trace, in fact, of what had happened when Aura passed by the spot on her way to the hills. Parkinson's persistent hysterics had been the most troublesome factor in the problem of concealment, but Martha had at last, losing patience, locked her away in one of the cottage bedrooms, and left her there with the callous remark, "She'll come round by herself, and if she don't, 'oo cares?"

Who, indeed, did care about anything? Martha and Adam went about their work as usual; her grandfather knew nothing; even Ted was away.

Aura felt terribly lonely for the first time in her life; the more so because it seemed to her as if part of her very self had rebelled against that other self which, for one-and-twenty years, had lived such a frank, clear life. For all those years she had carried no burden; but now Love and Death claimed to come with her. She could

not separate them even in her thoughts. One seemed to her destruction of the body, the other destruction of the mind.

So when leisure became hers at last she took up the thread of life where it had been broken by the intrusion into it of Gwen's death, and started to climb the hills, as she would have done at dawn. It was her natural instinct always. Other girls might shut themselves up in their rooms to think, might sit with their feet on the fender and dream. She had to go out, to feel the fresh breeze on her face, before her mind would work at all.

As she sat on the rocky sheep shelter, whither her feet had taken her almost unconsciously, since it was her favourite outlook, the winter sun beat down on her fiercely, warming her through to the heart. She could feel her very veins pulsing; their rhythm seemed almost to sing in her ears.

How warm it was! but in the shadows behind the big boulders—ay! and in the tiny shade of each blade of grass, each twig of bracken, the frost still lingered white, for the air was freeezing.

Sunshine and frost! Fire and ice!

That was exactly what she felt like herself! She was half fire, half ice; for a fierce virginity of mind fought desperately against the intrusion of that glad new impulse of self-surrender she had felt when she saw Ned's iris.

That, she supposed, was Love; but what was that sort of love worth if it brought death with it to—to herself —to her mind?

She felt indescribably smirched and stained. As she glanced at the fresh white serge skirt she was wearing she seemed to see on it still that crimson blood. It was horrible! It would be there always for her, scarlet as sin, no matter how white as wool it seemed to others.

Poor Gwen! That was the end of it all. She had, no doubt, yielded to Love. Had she had any terror of it at first? Had she also felt the degradation of it?

So, as she sat, more dreaming than thinking, a voice called her. She started to her feet, remembering in a flash that other man's voice which had called "Gwen" in that very place—the man whom she had called coward—whom she had smitten with the lily she held.

It was not an opportune moment for Ned Blackborough, who, having come over to Cwmfaernog with congratulations, had, after hearing from Martha of the tragedy, followed the girl straight to her favourite outlook with the sort of instinctive knowledge of what she would do, which he had always seemed to possess. At the present moment this was in itself an offence to Aura. What right had he to pry into her mind?

"What is wrong?" he asked, checked in his quick sympathy by the expression on her face. Another offence, since what right had he to know anything was wrong.

"Nothing," she answered curtly; "only I came here for quiet and it seems as if I am not to have it!"

He stared at her for a second; then, with a shrug of the shoulders, turned to go, thereby bringing to her a pang of remorse; since when had he not been courteous, not been kind?

His quick return, therefore, and the reckless obstinacy which showed on his face relieved her.

"A cat may look at a king, Miss Graham," he said coolly. "I came to say I was sorry. I am. And as I fail to see that your birthday has any monopoly over New Year's Day, I will wish you many happy returns of the latter. May your temper never grow worse."

She had to smile. The sudden outburst of truth was so like Ned when anything occurred to ruffle or disarrange the smooth covering of convention.

"Thank you," she replied quite frankly, feeling curiously at her ease; "I did not mean to be rude, but——"

"I know," he said simply, and paused. And she knew so well that he knew, that, though her lip quivered for a second she said no more. There was no need to say more.

It was so curious to have him sitting there beside her. Now that he had come all the trouble had gone; she was once more absolutely at her ease.

"And thanks also for the iris," she said after a pause, feeling glad to escape from the tragedies of life. "It is jolly; but I wish you hadn't dug the poor thing up."

"I did not dig it up," he replied coolly.

"You didn't—then how——"

"I wired to Covent Garden for another, and it came down in charge of such a superior person that I almost had to ask him to dine; so 'the most beautiful thing in the most beautiful place in the world' remains beside the sphinx as——" he paused.

"As what?" she asked.

He had come half-prepared to speak of his love, and there was about her face to-day a curious half-forlorn puzzled look which made him feel inclined to take her in his arms and kiss it away—"As a remembrance of you, naturally," he replied.

She sat down on the nearest stone feeling just a little dizzy, and clasping her hands across her knees stared out at the pale blue misty valley, and the pale blue winter sky beyond.

"But why should you want something to remember me by?" she said slowly. "I shall always remember you without anything."

Her freedom from conventional cloakings in speech was at all times a trifle disconcerting, and he felt inclined to reply "That is very kind of you," or make some other banal remark of the sort which might bring convention back. Then he cursed himself for a low beast, and followed her unconsciousness as closely as he could.

"Perhaps I wanted to remember the exact words you said," he suggested.

"But you do remember them," she answered aggrievedly; "that is what I complain of. You remember every little thing I say—and it is most uncomfortable. I cannot think why you should."

He took his fate in his hand. "Can't you—I can——. It is because I happen to love you."

She sat still for a second, then turned and looked at him with narrowing eyes. "I don't see what that has to do with it! You knew what I was thinking about the very first time we met, and you could not possibly have been in love with me then."

Her seriousness made him laugh outright. It was the most delicious piece of comedy to be sitting there talking of his love as if it did not belong to him, while his pulses—stay! were they bounding, or had they quieted down to a curious content?

"I am not so sure," he replied gravely. "There is such a thing, you are doubtless aware, as love at first sight."

"Not for sensible people, and I think we are sensible," she argued grudgingly. "I know, at any rate, that I was not in love with you for a long time afterwards."

The whole world seemed to spin round with Ned. . . .

"Then you are—oh! my dear, my dear!" . . .

"Please don't!" she cried, hastily drawing back from his outstretched hands; "I hate being touched. Besides that has nothing to do with what I want to find out. Why, from the very beginning, did you always understand? That can have nothing to do with love . . . not, at least, with love like Gwen's"—the last sentence came thoughtfully in a lower key.

"But our love will be different, dear," he said almost solemnly. "If you will marry me, Aura, I will try to understand to the very end—so help me God."

She smiled at him brilliantly. "And you would—you couldn't help it! But that is no reason why we should marry. It seems to me we have mixed things up somehow. No! that is no reason at all."

"Perhaps not," he admitted, following her thought. "Then marry me for some other reason, my dear."

She shook her head. "There is only one reason for marriage," she said, with a wisdom born of the untrammelled teaching of Nature, "and if I were to marry you

—I should be afraid—yes, Ned! I will tell you the truth because you are certain to understand—I should be afraid of loving you too much. I—I don't want to love like that."

He sat bewildered, his passion dying at the hands of truth. Then he muttered, half to himself, feeling with a rush of shame how far he was from her, how little he really understood her innocence of evil, "Heaven knows why you should—I am a miserable beast—but——. Oh! I hope to God you would, my dear—I hope to God you would!"

"Why?" she asked calmly, and he had no answer ready. So he harked back after a while to a lower level.

"That is the most original reason for refusing a man I ever heard," he said whimsically. "Have you any others of the same sort?"

She responded instantly to his mood. "Plenty!" she replied cheerfully. "To begin with, you are far too rich. I am only just beginning to realise how I should hate to have money—besides it is wrong, you know."

"I don't know," he said dryly; "but it is quite easy to divest oneself of money. I never find the slightest difficulty in getting rid of it—so don't let that stand in your way."

It was her turn to laugh—a soft, little laugh with a hint of reproof in it.

"I don't expect you do. Ted is always saying you are reckless. Then there is grandfather; you know he doesn't like you half so much as he likes Ted——"

"The deuce he doesn't!" assented Ned, his sudden pang of jealousy softened by his sense of the comic; "but you are surely not going to marry Ted in order to please your grandfather?"

She looked at him disapprovingly, "I might marry some one worse; Ted is a dear."

He felt exasperated. "Yes! he is an uncommonly good fellow; but—you don't happen to love him. And you do—at least I think you do"—he felt that certainty might overpower his self-control—"love me."

She took no notice of this, but went on argumentatively.

"Then I don't think I like marriage in your rank of life. With a poor man, and lots of work and trouble and children, it would be very interesting; but—look at Lady Smith-Biggs! I don't know what Sir Joseph is like, of course, but she looks as if she led a dull life."

"Very!" assented Ned, back to smiles once more. "But I wouldn't, if I were you, take Lady Smith-Biggs' as a test case; there are plenty of marriages——" he paused, feeling it would be difficult with Aura's standard to adduce many examples; but then he was prepared to chuck everything, and go forth with sandal shoon into the wilderness if need be. Yes! she was right. It was hardly marriage that he wanted after all.

So for a time they sat and looked out over the pale blue mists behind which the hills loomed large, seeming to lose themselves in the pale blue sky.

"There must be something better," said the girl at last. "Oh, Ned! there is something better!"

"Better than love," he echoed; "perhaps than some loves; not better than mine!"

"Don't people always say that? Perhaps *he* said it to Gwen——"

"Child!" he said swiftly, "don't think of that—that was not love."

"And it was not marriage either," she replied softly; "but what you mean has nothing to do with what is called love, with what is called marriage—that is what I mean too."

He shook his head. "That is too fine for me, Aura! I want you. I am not satisfied without you."

He was so close to her that he could lay his hand on hers.

"S—sh!" she said swiftly, laying her other hand on his so as to detain it. "Listen!"

Just below them, in a sheltered corrie, grew a great holly-tree covered with berries that glowed scarlet against the distant blue. On its topmost twig, with flam-

ing breast yellowed by the exceeding brilliance of those blood-red berries, a robin had settled itself to sing. And it sang.

Of what? Of the berries beneath its feet? Of its distant mate? Or out of the gladness of its heart of life because of the Beginning it did not remember, of the End it did not know?

Who can say? but it sang. And as it sang those two sat hand in hand, forgetful even of what humanity calls love. Forgetful of all things except that they also were dreaming the Dream of Life.

"Did I not say so?" she cried exultantly when the song had ceased. "Did I not tell you there was something better? You had forgotten me and I had forgotten you, yet we were happy."

"Because we were hand-clasped," he answered swiftly, "because I touched you, and you touched me."

She drew her hands away and a flush came to her face.

"But don't you feel afraid—as I do? Don't you want to keep what you love apart—to keep it safe—even from yourself?"

Did he not? Was it not only this which kept him back from taking her in his arms and kissing her to the knowledge of what a man's love must be.

"Yes!" he said unsteadily, constrained to truth by hers. "But there is a love which does not stain. I'll give it you—if I can."

She looked at him with a vain regret in her eyes. "You couldn't if we were married, and I couldn't anyhow. Ah no, Ned! It would spoil it all."

"Spoil what?" he asked roughly, for he began to feel himself worsted for the time.

"The something better," she replied gaily, "let us wait for that. I really don't want to marry you, Ned. I should hate it. I knew that when I saw your iris."

"Then I wish I hadn't climbed up to put it on your window-sill and wricked my bad arm into the bargain," he said sullenly.

Her face grew grave. "Did you climb up; that was very wrong."

"Was it?" he replied shrugging his shoulders; "but I'm afraid I'm a very wrong person altogether. At the present moment I feel inclined to—to—but what is the use—you wouldn't understand. Aura! for the last time, will you marry me?"

"No, Ned, I won't."

"Then that ends it," he said recklessly. "So good-bye."

She paled a little.

"Must you go?"

"One of us must," he replied, caught in fresh hope, "unless you change your mind."

"That is impossible—but you will come back, won't you?"

He looked at her full of impatience, yet full of tenderness.

"I believe I ought to say that I won't, but——" Then he held out his hand, "I understand—apart from everything else in the world—what this love of ours—" her hand trembled in his for a second, "means to us—both. I will go away for—yes! for two months, and give you time to think. Then I will come back. Good-bye, my dear. I can only say it once more—I love you."

For an instant as he left her she stood still, her lip quivering; then she called to him:

"Come back, please! I want to give you this."

She held out the bunch of winter heliotrope which had been fastened in her coat; its faint scent had been in the air as he had sat beside her holding her hand.

It was too much; the passion he had held back, not unwillingly for so long, mastered him. "This is foolishness," he cried, striding towards her, "you do love me—why can you not say so—you might at least tell the truth."

Something in her face arrested him.

"The truth," she echoed, "I have told you the truth. I think I do love you, and I am sorry, and vexed, and

angry.'' Her clear eyes were looking through his as if she could see into his innermost thought. '' But I will not marry you. I am afraid. Do you understand what that means to me? I am afraid of myself, and for you, for you deserve something better.''

Suddenly she stooped, kissed the withering flowers she held, dropped them at his feet and was off like a mist wreath down the hill.

He did not attempt to follow her. He simply sat down again on the stone where he had been sitting before, and swore to God that sooner or later he would marry her.

And then he fell to thinking of how once or twice in his life before he had caught a glimpse, as he had just now caught one, of that '' something better,'' beyond the Dream of Life.

Once, when he was a boy watching the trail of silvery bubbles left behind it in the brown stream by a water-rat as it swam. Once again as a young man, when he had paid half a crown for a penny bunch of violets, and something in their sweetness had made him add half a sovereign to their price and go on his way.

Then the present reasserted itself. He could not possibly take this for his answer, he must wait till the shock of Gwen's death had faded, until Aura became accustomed to the idea of her own love for him—for that she did love him he had little doubt. It was briefly her love which had frightened her, quaint compound as she was of nature and culture. He would leave her to think it out for two months. During that time he also would have time to make up his mind concerning many things. He was becoming dimly conscious that life was resolving itself into the spending of money in order to escape from the responsibilities of having money, into the fighting of money by money.

It would be rather interesting to let the fight go on while he raised no finger to protect his own personal rights; if indeed he had any, which he was beginning to doubt. He and Aura would be as happy—nay! hap-

pier without money. Yes! in the one thing worth having, the one thing without which even life itself was not worth having, money had no purchasing power whatever.

"I am only just beginning to realise how I should hate to be rich."

Aura's words came back to him. She need not fear. If she would only consent to marry him, he would chuck everything he possessed!—barring a modest competence of course!—after the sovereigns he had chucked that June morning into the little lochan at the gap.

He had never thought of the hidden money since that day. It had gone clean out of his head. Now, as he stood up to try and locate the exact dip on the hills where it lay, his own words came back to him.

"Neither I nor the world would suffer if I made ducks and drakes of these sovereign remedies."

He seemed to hear the soft *whit whitter* of the skimming gold and to see the blank look on the faces around him.

There were other ways of getting rid of gold, however, than by chucking it into a pond. You had in this civilised world but to let your neighbour know that you had it in your pocket, and it was sure to go.

So, despite his refusal, with a light laugh he started down the hill.

CHAPTER XVII

AURA, however, felt bruised and broken, as with slower, heavier foot than usual she crossed the drawbridge, and choosing the back way, went through the cottage to the kitchen.

Her first look at that sanctuary of shiny saucepans showed her that something in the nature of a domestic cataclysm had occurred during her absence; for the kitchen-table was littered with cake-tins, and the materials for making cakes, a savoury smell telling of cakes rose from the oven, and Martha herself, with a hot flushed face, was beating viciously at the whites of eggs which were to go towards a further making of cakes. Now such activity was Martha's invariable method of showing that she had what she called "a bit o' time" to herself; therefore her invariable habit when she found herself once more monarch of all she surveyed and so presumably rather pressed for time.

"Has Parkinson gone?" asked Aura swiftly.

"Yes! Miss H'Aura," replied Martha, pausing to make a dive into the oven and come up therefrom still more flushed and still more determined. "She's gone. Bad barm won't never bake 'ouseholds as my mother used to say; and glad was I to be rid of her, for I shud a' put her past afore long, yes! I shud, and a' got 'ung for it I s'ppose—it ain't any good lookin' shocked, Miss H'Aura, for a body can't 'elp her feelin's, and put her past I shud, for Bate, he began to pity her shet up alone! 'If you says much more,' says I, 'it's to the pigstyes she'll go'—an' the only proper place for 'er, Miss H'Aura, and me havin' to black my tongue tellin' master it was the sow as was squealin' so! But there! Them as 'as no 'eads takes it out in 'earts, and Bate is that soft

about wimmin, 'tis all I can do to keep from kneadin' more flour to him as if he was a silly batch o' bread! But we'll do all right without 'er caps an' aprons; and *so I told Bate.*"

Martha's face, indeed, wore a determination which augured well for domestic comfort.

"But grandfather—" began Aura anxiously, "he ought not to be disturbed."

"Who's a disturbing of the good gentleman?" snapped Martha, "Pore dear, 'e'll have 'is shavin' water 'ot in future. How they can stand, brazen, an' ask wages beats me! An' she talkin' o' the waste o' water being a crime against the company—a water company, winter time, in Wales! Lord sakes!—if she run the cold off, as I bid her do; though 'er pantry tap was spoutin' into the pail a good 'arf hour while she was beguilin' Bate. No! Miss H'Aura! I wasn't goin' to lie for 'er more'n I cud 'elp, so I told master the stric' truth-an'-no-one-a-penny-the-worse, as the sayin' is."

"What did you tell him?" asked Aura rather wearily, for even Martha was getting on her nerves.

"I told him as revivals havin' bin too much for her body *an'* soul she was stoppin' at the inn, where she is, Miss H'Aura, and if she screech there as she screeched here some one 'll be in Bedlam before mornin'—*an' so I told Bate.*"

This was the invariable epilogue to all Martha's diatribes.

"I suppose Mr. Cruttenden has returned?" asked Aura.

"As nice as nuts, an' is in with Master. I reely don't know, now I come to think on it, what we shud a-done this last week without 'im! Not but what 'is lordship——" she shot a quick glance at Aura—"Lord sakes! deary," she cried, "you do look weary-like. Go up to your bed, there's a duck, an' have a lie down—one can't never forget the face o' death till one's asleep."

'Death, and his brother sleep!' . . .

The words were in Aura's brain as she went upstairs, wondering why it was that now Ned was no longer beside her she felt far more disturbed, far more, in a way, ashamed about him, than she had done when he was beside her. Yes! even when he had been masterful and told her that it was all foolishness, that she knew she loved him.

The house seemed so familiarly quiet and peaceful that the turmoil of her mind became all unreal to her. Surely the least honest effort must suffice to bring back her old fearlessness of outlook.

Her birthday presents lay on the table, amongst them Ted's Shelley, open, curiously enough, at the "Adonais." Her eye glanced at the verses, became fascinated; she stood reading until with a sigh of infinite satisfaction she closed the book over those words:

'The One remains, the Many change and pass!'

That was beautiful. That calmed the soul. Gwen's dead face came back to her now without any terror in it. The Sting of Death was gone.

But Love—the love that Gwen had felt, of which she herself was not all unconscious, what of that?

Dimly, darkly, as in a glass, the girl saw that to be noble it must be the antithesis of Death—it must be Birth. But that was not the Love of the world. What had Mervyn, what had Gwen, thought of Birth? Nothing. If anything they had hoped to evade it. They had tried to take the Pleasure without incurring the Pain. They had not thought of anything but themselves.

She passed on to the window-sill and looked down once more on the "most beautiful thing in the most beautiful place in the world."

But what was that really?

Was it Love standing between Birth and Death, or was it something better? Something beyond both. Something of which but a glimpse could be caught during that journey between the Cradle and the Grave?

So, for one brief moment as she stood looking at the iris she saw that Something, beyond Birth, beyond Death, beyond even Love. A shimmer came to the air, her pulses caught the rhythm, and lo! she was no more, the One was All, and from the uttermost end of Space came back the ceaseless Wave of Unity.

And then? . . .

Then the fear of death re-asserted itself. Surely the flags of the iris showed limp! The dear thing must not stop there without due foothold on the round world, else would it lose the immortality of new birth.

So, tired as she was, she lifted it up, saxifrage and all, in both her hands, went downstairs, and so across the lawn to a place she wotted of where it might grow undisturbed by fear of old Adam's meddling fork. There was a certain solemnity about her necessarily slow movements, and she felt almost as if she were conducting a funeral. And so in truth it was; a funeral of her careless girlhood. She was a woman now; she had begun to understand herself. Yet as she laid the flower on the spot where she intended to plant it and went for her trowel, the pity of the funeral hit her hard, and when she returned Ned's blue eyes seemed to look at her appealingly from the iris's broad face. His were such beautiful eyes!

She dug furiously, forgetful of everything but her desire to bury, until a step sounded beside her, and she looked up to see another pair of blue eyes broader, bolder, looking down at her.

"What are you digging," said Ted with a ring of aggrievedness in his voice; "a grave? Oh! I beg your pardon, dear, I oughtn't to have said that, I oughtn't to have reminded you—but I 've been expecting you to return for such a long while—and—oh! my poor little girl—I 'm so sorry for it all—it must have been horrible."

His normal sympathy brought her back to normal. She realised as she had not realised with Ned, that after all she was but a mere girl who needed cossetting and comforting after the terrible shock of the morning.

"It was horrible," she replied, with a little shiver;

" you can't think how horrible—somehow, after it all, it is good to see you just—just yourself."

She felt indeed grateful to him for his size, his solidity, his undoubted affection: perhaps unconsciously she was grateful to him for his failure to disturb her inmost soul.

" It must have been awful," he said, his blue eyes showing all the kindness in the world. " I can't think how you got through with it as you have; but you are so brave—far braver than I should be—but come, don't let us talk or think of it any more. Don't let us spoil my last afternoon."

She stood up startled. " Your last! " she cried, in quick concern. " Oh! Ted, why is it your last? "

He took a step nearer to her, his face lit up with content. " I'm so glad you care—I suppose it's selfish—but I am glad. Yes! I have to go. Hirsch has business for me in Paris—most important business, and I must leave by the mail to-night."

Even as he spoke, his mind running on ahead, thought with a different content of what this visit to Paris might mean to them both, if things turned out as he hoped they might.

" Must you? " she echoed wistfully. It seemed to her as if every friend she had had was leaving; and Ted had been such a help to her during the last few anxious days. " How shall we manage without you? " she went on doubtfully; " grandfather will miss you so much—and I——"

There were almost tears in her voice, and Ted felt a wild desire then and there to come to explanations. But he knew it was wiser to wait.

" I will come back at once if I am wanted," he replied; " but I hope I shan't be wanted—at least not in any hurry; for of course I shall come back again soon—and then—but I really haven't time now. I have to put up my things you see. I stayed as long as I could with him thinking you would be sure to come in at once——" there was the faintest reproach in his tone.

An instant pang of remorse shot through the girl. She had stopped talking sentimental rubbish to Ned while he —Ted—was doing her duty.

"I will go in to him in a moment," she said hurriedly, "I have only to plant this flower."

She set to work hurriedly, Ted lingering to look down superciliously at the iris.

"It's rather pretty," he said; "did you find it in the woods?"

Aura's blush was hidden as she hastily filled in to proper dimensions the perfect grave she had previously dug.

"No. Ned gave it me as—as a New Year's gift."

Ted half smiled, thinking that if he had had as much money as Lord Blackborough he would have known better how to spend it on the girl he loved; but, of course, if Ned chose to be so niggardly in some things, so lavish in others, it was his own lookout.

"I hope you liked the book; the binding wasn't quite so nice as I should have wished," he began.

Aura interrupted him heartily.

"I liked it ever so much—thanks so many! And I shall always like it. That is the best of books—summer and winter they are always the same"—she became taken with her own thought and pursued it—"they aren't like flowers—you haven't to watch for their blooming time—you haven't even to smell their scent—you haven't to think for them of storms or slugs or frost and field mice" —here she smiled at her own alliterations—"but if you want them, there they are, ready to make you happy. Do you know, you've been a regular book to me lately, Ted?"

He flushed up with pleasure. "Have I?" he said frankly; "that's good hearing. I—I wish I were your whole library——" Once more he paused, obsessed by that idea of the night-mail to Paris.

As he went off to pack his things he almost wished that she had come in a little earlier; but then he would not have had such an eminently satisfactory talk with her

grandfather. So far as he, at any rate, was concerned it was all plain sailing, for the old man, distressed at hearing of Ted's sudden departure, had for the first time taken him into his confidence. It was not exactly a pleasing confidence, but it was only what Ted had expected. Aura would be penniless, since years before Sylvanus Smith had sunk all his money in an annuity which would cease with his death. Under the circumstances, Ted had felt that both the kindest and the wisest thing was to allay anxiety—that tardy anxiety which was in itself but another form of selfishness—by speaking of his own love for Aura, and his earnest desire to marry her, if she would have him.

"Of course she will marry you!" Mr. Sylvanus Smith had said with calm shrewdness. "Who else is there for her to marry?"

Whereupon Ted, divided as to whether he was doing a magnanimous or a mean thing, had suggested Lord Blackborough. It had produced a perfect storm of incredulous irritation. The bare idea was absurd. Blackborough, like all in his rank, was merely amused by a pretty face. He, Sylvanus Smith, had only tolerated him as Ted's friend, and he would forbid him the house in future; no granddaughter of his should marry a lord!

Briefly, the old man whose life had been spent in preaching socialism and liberty in the abstract, who denied the existence of social rank, and proclaimed the right of the individual to independent action, was ready to forswear both tenets, and pose as a relentless parent of the good old type.

Ted had forborne to smile, and, feeling really magnanimous this time, had attempted to smooth over the old man's irritation, which none the less he knew to be points in his favour.

So, as he packed his portmanteau, he whistled lightheartedly.

Aura, meanwhile having finished her burial, went off to the book-room where she found her grandfather, as usual,

busy with pen and paper, the writing-table drawn up to the fire, the solitary extra chair in which Ted had been sitting looking lone and outcast, camped away in the open beyond the leather screen which in winter always surrounded Mr. Smith's socialism and the fire.

He was looking a little flushed, and she paused, ere sitting down on the floor by the hearth to say anxiously, "You haven't been vexing yourself, I hope, grandfather, while I was away—I—I had rather a headache—so I went up the hills. Martha——"

"Martha has been excellent, as usual," he replied, "on the whole she does Parkinson's work fairly well; though I could wish——" here he sighed—"the absence of a suitable cap and apron is certainly to be deplored, but she makes an excellent omelette." He turned again to his work of writing a pamphlet on the Simple Life.

Aura sat watching him, as she had watched him as long as she could remember. She was very fond, very proud of him. Extremely well read, curiously quick in mind, he had taught her everything she knew, and she was but just beginning to find out that this everything was more than most women are supposed to know. She had found no difficulty in holding her own with Ned and Ted, and Dr. Ramsay and Mr. Hirsch, except so far as mere knowledge of the world went, and *that* was not worth counting.

To her mind grandfather had had the best of any argument she had ever heard; but then Ned would never argue with him.

Still he had not taught her all things. He had never mentioned love or marriage, or birth or death, though these surely were the chief factors in life—in a woman's life anyhow.

Suddenly, out of the almost bewildering ramifications of her thought, she put, almost thoughtlessly, a question.

"Grandfather, was my father fond of me?"

Mr. Sylvanus Smith looked up startled, and distinctly pale. "I had not the honour of your father's acquaintance," he said icily, "therefore I cannot say." Then he,

as it were, pulled himself together. "And you will oblige me," he continued, "by not asking any more questions of the sort. I cannot answer them."

He went on writing, but his hand trembled a little. She had heard this formula more than once, but after a time, moved thereto by the new stress in her thoughts, the girl rose, and going up behind him stood looking over his shoulder.

"Grandfather," she said, "I am not going to ask any more questions about the past. I don't see that it matters at all. I should like to have known that my father was—was glad of me; my mother must have been, I think, though she died so soon. But I should like to know what is in the future. What—what do you expect me to do? Do you wish me to marry?"

He turned round in his chair, and looked at her helplessly.

"That is rather a peculiar question, my dear," he said feebly, "but, of course——"

"Don't answer it if it worries you, please," she urged quickly; "but if you could speak of it—it would be a great help."

Vaguely she felt choky over the last words. It did seem so hard to be left all alone in the wide world to face these dark problems.

"It—it is not a usual subject for discussion, even between parent and child, Aura," he replied; "but if you ask me—yes. I am extremely anxious for you to marry."

"Why?" The question came swiftly.

Mr. Sylvanus Smith put down his pen finally, and turned his feet to the fire. He thought for a moment of quite a variety of reasons. Because it was the natural end of woman; . . . but for years past he had laboured in vain to convince the world that marriage was slavery. Because he wished her to be happy? . . . but so many marriages were unhappy. Because he would have liked to see grandchildren about him? . . . but in his innermost heart he knew that a few months of life was all for which he had any right to look.

He decided finally on the real reason.

"Because—because when I die, my child, and that cannot be far off——"

"Grandfather, don't!"

Her voice became poignant with fond reproof.

He heaved a sigh, and honestly felt himself heroic.

"My dear," he said grandly, "there is no use in deceiving ourselves—I may live—but on the other hand," he waved his pretty white hand gracefully. The conversation was beginning to interest him, and though he had acquiesced in Ted Cruttenden's desire to let the question stand over for the present, he felt there could be no harm in diagnosing Aura's attitude. "The fact is, my dear, that when I die you will be very badly off, in fact, it is a source of the very greatest anxiety to me, Aura, you will have nothing—I mean no money—and unless you are married—happily married—I do not see how you can earn your own livelihood."

"Then I should earn it by being married!" she asked.

"Well! hardly so; but—it would be a great weight off my mind, Aura. So—if you have the chance——"

She stood still for a moment or two, then once more seating herself on the floor, this time at his feet, she turned her face to the fire. "I have the chance," she said at last in a clear voice, "Lord Blackborough asked me to marry him to-day. I refused—but——" Her face was still hidden, but a curious expectancy came to her whole attitude. She seemed on the alert.

Sylvanus Smith who had sat up prepared to curse, sank back in his chair to bless with a sigh of relief. "You refused him! Thank God! My dear child, you—you caused me the most painful alarm; though I might have trusted your good sense to see that it would have been—a—a most unsuitable marriage."

The alertness had gone. "Would it?" she said indifferently, "Yes! I suppose it would." She said no more, though all unconsciously the iron was entering her heart, the young glad animal heart which clamoured for pleasure. Still, what her grandfather had called her

good sense had shown her this unsuitability at once, though his grounds for his opinion were most likely very different from hers. At the same time it was her decision. She had made it of her own free will. There was no coercion about it. She had made it, and it was as well that others endorsed her action.

So she essayed a smile and turned towards him. "Then I don't think I have any other chance of getting married just at present, grandfather," she said lightly, "but if anybody 'comes along——'" She paused, joking on the subject being a trifle beyond her.

The old man sat looking at her with real affection overlaid by the quaint sense of magnanimity which pursued him in every relation of life, the result no doubt of his unquestioning acceptance of himself as philanthropic benefactor to the race. Should he or should he not tell her what he had just heard from Ted?

Something in the slackness of her attitude as she sat crouched by the fire, something of weariness in the young face which, as a rule, was so buoyant with the *joie de vivre,* made him decide on telling her. There could be no harm in finding out how she was prepared to receive the suggestion. He drew his chair closer.

"But there you are mistaken surely. Has it never occurred to you that — that perhaps — Mr. Cruttenden——"

"Ted!" echoed Aura. "No! Grandfather, it is you who are mistaken. Ted and I have always been the best of friends—the very best of friends! but he has never— Oh! I can assure you he has never been the least—never the least like Ned—I mean Lord Blackborough."

"Perhaps that stands to his credit," remarked the old man chillily. "Love is not shown—by—by love-making. But I am sure of what I say, my dear, because—Ted as you call him—though in my young days—but we will let that pass for the present—told me himself that the dearest wish of his heart——"

At this moment the door opened and Ted himself,

light-hearted, free, eager to have what he could of Aura's company, came in.

"I've finished," he cried, "so now for something better——" he paused, conscious that the air was full of something more important at any rate. Was it better, or was it worse?

Mr. Sylvanus Smith essayed a discreet innocence by a warning cough to Aura, and a hasty return to his papers; but the girl was too much in earnest for silence. Her nerves, overstrung by the strain of the long day, during which almost everything to be learnt in life seemed to have been crowded into a few hours, vibrated to this new possibility. She rose instantly, and advancing a step or two stood facing the young man with a new recklessness in her expression. "Ted," she said, and there was a note of appeal in her voice, "Grandfather has been telling me something I can't believe. Is it true that you also want to marry me?"

For an instant surprised out of balance, overwhelmed by the utter unconventionality of the question the young man hesitated. Yes or no seemed to him equally out of keeping. Then his passion for her came to the rescue, and something told him that the question would never have been asked if the girl had not staked herself, body and soul, on the answer.

He strode across the room and took her by her outstretched hands.

"I have wanted it, Aura," he said, and his voice vibrated as the whole world seemed to him to be vibrating, "ever since I saw you first—do you remember—" he was drawing her closer to him unresisting, though in her eyes there was a certain expectant dread, "you were standing—surely you remember—" his voice grew softer —"in the garden room—standing in the sunlight with the flowers behind you—and the cockatoo——" the sentence ended in the first kiss which had ever fallen on Aura's lips.

She did not shrink. On the contrary, she gave a little sigh of satisfaction, and looked gratefully at Ted.

"Yes, I remember," she said softly, "and ever since then you have been so good to me."

"Then you will marry me, Aura," he said—"you will really marry me?"

"If it makes you happy—if you really mean it, and—" she turned to her grandfather—"does it make you happy too?"

He was busy with his pocket handkerchief, and blew his nose ere he replied. "My happiness is assured if—if you—" He said no more, for his memory was clear, and there are some things which do not grow dim with years, and one of them is the remembrance of love.

"I am quite happy," she said gravely, "and I think I shall always be happy with Ted."

Whereupon Ted kissed her again, and tried to realise that he was in the seventh heaven of delight; as he was indeed, though he felt rather rushed as he thought of the night mail to Paris.

"We have hardly time to get engaged decently and in order," he said joyfully. "You will have to wait for your ring, my darling."

"My ring?" she echoed inquiringly, whereupon Ted laughed still more joyfully at her entrancing ignorance of the world and its ways; but Sylvanus Smith, who had been looking into the fire, roused himself to touch a ring which he always wore on his little finger. "I have one here," he said dreamily; "it holds her mother's hair."

"My mother's!" cried Aura gladly, "Oh! may I have it, grandfather?"

Ted looked with distaste at the little mourning ring; just a plait of bronze brown hair like Aura's set in a plain gold rim as a background to "In Memoriam" in black enamel letters.

"It is rather grisly," he whispered fondly as he slipped it on to the girl's finger, "but it will do to—to keep the place warm! By and by it shall be diamonds."

She shook her head. "I shall like this best," she said,

" it will remind me of——" And then she lifted her finger to her lips and kissed the little ring. It would be hers always to remind her of Love and Death, and Birth that came between the two.

CHAPTER XVIII

Poor Gwen's death had caused quite a pleasurable excitement in the village.

There can be no question that to all save the immediate few whose natural emotions are involved, most deaths bring a quicker tide of life to the living.

It has been said, indeed, that funerals are often the preludes to marriage. Be that as it may, Gwen, despite her gift of grace, had lived all her short life on such a different plane from the rest of the village girls that, except in the little shepherd's cottage amid the hills, few real tears were shed over her dramatic death.

And it was so dramatic! To die in full song—to shed her life-blood in trying to bring the glad news to other souls. Surely that must avail! Surely that sacrifice must turn those sinful souls to peace.

Though they did not know it, and for Mr. Sylvanus Smith's prospect of peace, it was as well he did not, both Aura and her grandfather were special objects of intercession at many hundreds of chapels the very next Sunday. For the story naturally grew in the telling.

Meanwhile Gwen, poor soul, was laid with much fervour beside her baby, the rector duly officiating; for the old shepherd and his wife, thinking of their own funerals to come, held fast to tradition. Whatever else you might be in life, death brought you back to the Church, back to the solemn old service in which dust is reverently committed to dust, ashes to ashes.

Nearly all the village attended, for, in a way, it was proud of Gwen. There was but one notable absence. Alicia Edwards was not there to take her part in singing "Day of Wrath" over her dead friend. She was in

bed or at any rate confined to her room; for the dramatic death on New Year's morning had apparently been too much for her nerves.

The gossips of the village went in and out, condoling with her, and applauding her sensibility, and retailing to her all the affecting particulars of the funeral, the wreaths, the remembrances from souls saved by the dead girl's singing, the excellence of the mournings provided by Myfanwy Jones, and the apparently real grief of Mervyn Pugh, who went about looking like a lost soul himself.

Only over the latter statement did Alicia Edwards commit herself so far as to say with sphinx-like gravity, "I do not wonder. Mervyn and Gwen were always friends. Yes, indeed! even at school they were friends."

Looking back from her new knowledge concerning Gwen's past, Alicia's only wonder was, indeed, that no one had ever suspected Mervyn. And yet, who could suspect Mervyn? Mervyn, the pattern of the village; Mervyn, among whose perfections her own facile heart had been entangled these many years past. Nor was she alone. Half the village girls would have given their eyes to secure him for their own.

And now that he had fallen from his high pedestal, it seemed to her, woman-like, that she desired him more than ever. That desire, in truth, was the cause of her seclusion. She was not ill—simply she could not make up her mind what to do. One-half of her asserted that she ought to denounce Mervyn; that it was wrong for her to allow him thus to play the hypocrite, that it would be good for his soul's health to do penance in sackcloth and ashes; the other half found excuses for him beneath the cloak of consideration for the slur which would be cast by the unrighteous over the whole revival, could it be shown that one of the most prominent in starting it was —so to speak—an unrepentant castaway; for repentance in such a case as this meant the confession for which the elders of the congregation had clamoured, the lack of

which had sent an unbaptized child to the happily infinite mercy-seat of God.

Alicia knew all this. She had been well brought up, well drilled by her father in the catechisms, and in her inmost soul—a very conventional, placid, harmless soul—she was quite shocked at Mervyn's stony-heartedness. For all that, she could not make up her mind to denounce him. She would give him time. He knew that she knew his secret, and that she was the only person in the world now who knew it—at least of this world; for the "wild girl of Cwmfairnog," as the village had dubbed Aura, had not even attended the inquest. Martha had given her evidence, and Martha had known nothing. So there was no likelihood of the truth coming out except through her, Alicia. Perhaps Mervyn, knowing this, would come to her and unburden his soul. Undoubtedly, if Providence had not intended her to denounce ths sinner—and of this, as the days went on, she became more and more certain—it must have had some other purpose in making her the sole recipient of the terrible knowledge.

What purpose?

For to her, as to Morris Pugh, as to nearly all these traffickers in cheap marvels, the impulse to see some hidden meaning, some direct dealing of the Creator with His creature man, had become almost an obsession.

What purpose, then, could Providence have had in thus choosing Alicia Edwards out of all the village to be this sole recipient?

The answer was easy. That Mervyn might come to her as a sort of mediator, as he might have come to a father confessor.

So, as the time wore on, Alicia waited for Mervyn; but Mervyn never appeared, not even after she came down, becomingly dressed in deep mourning, to sit in the back parlour and receive her friends. Myfanwy Jones, whose holiday had been extended over the funeral by reason of the many orders she had successfully placed for it, looked in several times, but there was not much love lost between

the two nowadays. So when, on the morning after the funeral, Myfanwy came to say good-bye, Alicia was relieved. She felt the influence of this big, beautiful, worldly creature to be malign; and, once it was removed, she was sure that Mervyn would surely return to the holder of his secret.

"You will be going by the midday carrier," said Alicia cheerfully; "you will have a fine drive to Llanilo whatever."

"A beautiful drive," assented Myfanwy; "I was trying to make Mervyn Pugh take it with me for a change, but he prefers to mope. I did not know him such a friend of poor dead Gwen."

She challenged Alicia with her bold black eyes, and Alicia felt herself flush.

"When people spend their lives together in holy work, Myfanwy dear," she replied in a purring voice, "it is very close they grow to each other, very close indeed."

"If they spend their lives together anyway," retorted Myfanwy with a superior laugh, "they often grow very close—very close indeed—sometimes too close."

But Alicia was prepared for her, and smiled sweetly. "You do not understand religion, Myfanwy. As Mervyn says, it is such a pity—but we must hope for the best—it will come some day."

"So will Christmas," replied Myfanwy with a sphinx-like smile; "but I am not fond of waiting, whatever you may be. Well, good-bye, dear. Do not be frightened when Williams and Edwards send in their bill—it need not be paid till you are married, remember."

Alicia paled. The memory of that bill was more to her now than the mere fact that when it came, it would mean a demand for money. That she might manage; but how about the claim on her character? For it would be a big bill, a record of much extravagance. One comfort was that, if she married Mervyn—which seemed not so unlikely now as it had seemed a short time ago—he would not be so terribly shocked; or at any rate he would not be in a position to throw so many stones!

It was a lovely afternoon, one of those early January days when earth and sea and sky combine to play a trick on the world, and cheat it into the belief that winter is over. The air, too, felt lighter, more wholesome to Alicia, now that Myfanwy Jones had presumably left the village; presumably, because, though Alicia had not actually seen her go, her boxes had certainly been in the carrier's cart.

Alicia had almost made up her mind that if the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. Another Sunday must not pass without an explanation between her and Mervyn; it would not be right to allow him to remain without reproof and exhortation.

It required a good deal of courage, for she was by nature timid; but by making a duty of it, and assuring herself that his soul's good was her only object, she succeeded in bracing herself up to sufficient virtue for her task. So, feeling there was no time like the present, she spent half an hour in making herself look as attractive as she could in her singing dress—and that had been designed with considerable care for appearances—and set off on her mission. She did not go straight to the minister's house, which stood at the further end of the village—a most incongruous, unhappy-looking villa, such as one sees by dozens in the suburbs of any large town, all stucco, bow windows, and gable ends—for that might have provoked attention. She branched off to the left and so, going up the School Road, was prepared to make her visit on the return journey by going down a pathway which led from the school towards the house. She had often returned from class thus with Mervyn, choosing the longer road for the sake of the handsome boy's company. The thought made her mind drift back to those long years during which she had been taught, and had taught, so many things. What a relief it had been to escape from living by rule; so much time for this, so much time for that; duty punctual as the clock, dependent on the machinery, certain to run down and

stop unless it received some continual impetus from without.

—'That which cometh from without.'—

The words came back to her vaguely. Yes! she had been taught so many things. What had she herself learnt? How many four shillings' worth of stamps, for instance, had she not saved up herself, or caused her pupils to save up. Every child in the village had a post-office savings' bank book. They had been taught thrift. But every one of the girls would do as she had done—run into debt over their clothes—or at least put their money on their backs. She was tired of it all. She was hungering for her natural work. She wanted to be the wife of some strong man, bear him children, and live immersed in household details. That was her *métier*; she felt drawn to that.

So, as she turned in at the back entrance of the minister's house, her heart was soft; she felt in a sentimental mood. The past was past. Most men's lives held something that was not quite—well, quite respectable—but in this case there would be earnest repentance to make that past more—more presentable.

And then through the window of the dining-room she saw a group of two people standing, their faces to the fire, their backs towards her; but there could be no doubt as to the skin-tight black sheen of the waist round which Mervyn's arm circled in all the security of possession. It was Myfanwy's—Myfanwy in her best dress also!

In a second all the hot Cymric blood which lay hidden somewhere behind Alicia's almost phlegmatic calm had leapt up in resentment; and almost before she realised what she was doing, she had passed the entrance and stood in the room, challenging those two. The table was laid for tea; there was an air of placid comfort, of as it were collusion, which gave the finishing-touch to her anger.

"So you have not gone with the carrier, Myfanwy Jones?" she said.

Mervyn's arm left the black-satin waist hastily, but Myfanwy did not budge. She simply threw a backward glance over her shoulder.

"Oh! good afternoon, Alicia! No! I did not go. Mervyn and I are to drive over to Llanilo in Thomas's waggonette, as soon as we have had our tea."

In an instant it resolved itself into a duel between these two women for the possession of the man who stood, his beauty somewhat blurred by anxiety, looking like a fool between them.

"But I have come," replied Alicia firmly, "to have a talk with Mervyn about—about something; so, perhaps, you will drive alone to Llanilo, Myfanwy. It might be better." She fixed Mervyn with an eye that held in it a world of entreaty besides some indignation.

His inward uneasiness felt the threat. "Perhaps it would be better, Myfanwy," he said helplessly, "We have much to talk over and arrange before we start again on—on our work."

Myfanwy turned on him like a flash. "Will you hold your tongue, Mervyn Pugh," she said magnificently. "This is between Alicia Edwards and me." Then she turned back again to her adversary, "Say what you will to him now, Alicia. We are engaged to be married, so you can say to me what you will say to him."

Alicia gave a little cry of real dismay. "Oh Mervyn! Say it is not true;—think of poor silly Gwen, but just dead!" she pulled herself up, being in truth still but half-hearted in her desire to denounce.

Myfanwy shot a swift glance at Mervyn; she was really and honestly fond of him, and the idea, at any rate, which Alicia's words suggested was not new to her. Still no matter what she said to him about it in the future, this was the time for defence—quick, ready defence.

"Yes!" she said. "Gwen is dead, so why should you drag her out of the grave, poor soul! 'Let the dead past bury its dead,' Alicia, you learnt that in school, I am sure. And, whatever happens, I am going to marry Mervyn—of that you may be sure."

It was then that Alicia, feeling the inward certainty that this was true, that her bolt had failed of its mark, gave the rein to denunciation.

"But I must speak to him! Oh Mervyn! Think," she cried, her voice ringing with a perfect medley of emotion, "you who have saved so many, think of your own soul. Think how the soul of your child, think how the soul of poor Gwen cry out against you!"

A man's step on the gravel outside made Myfanwy start forward with a muffled exclamation.

"Be quiet, will you! you will be overheard—you—you will ruin him! Will you hold your tongue?" she cried.

But Alicia was past worldly wisdom; even with Myfanwy's strong hand threatening her, she stood her ground, and her voice rose—

"Let them hear! Let all the world know that Mervyn Pugh—Mervyn the good, the righteous, is Gwen's seducer, the father of her child!"

Then, even her anger failed before the knowledge that Morris Pugh stood at the door listening.

With a muffled cry Mervyn turned and flung himself down on the sofa, his face crushed into the hard horsehair cushions; vaguely he felt their hardness to be a shelter.

Myfanwy, looking as if she could have killed Alicia, moved to him and laid her hand softly, protectingly on his shoulder.

"Do not fret, Mervyn," she said coldly, "it will soon be over."

So for a space there was silence. Then Morris Pugh braced himself to the task which was his, as pastor of these wandering sheep.

"As you stand before your Maker, Alicia Edwards," he said, bringing his hand down on the table to grip it with clenched nervous force, "is this accusation true?"

Her answer was a sudden burst of tears, "Don't—don't ask me," she sobbed.

"Is it true?"

His voice insistent, almost cold in its very insistence, would take no denial.

"Yes!" The assent could scarcely be heard for the sobs.

Morris Pugh gave a sigh. It was almost as if all that was human in him left his body with that long, laboured breath, for an instant afterwards he was the accuser, the judge.

"And you—Mervyn Pugh—God forgive you for bearing my father's honoured name—have done this wrong without repentance. You have stood by your child's grave and said never a word—never a word even to me, your spiritual guide, although I asked you, remember that! I asked you; and you have stood before the Lord all these long months, eating at His Table, drinking of His Blood, with this sin lying unconfessed in your heart! And you and the partner of your sin have stood together before the Great White Throne, your voices mingling in God's praise while your bodies——"

Mervyn started to his feet.

"Morris! Morris! before Heaven, that is not true—no! I am not so bad as that!"

Checked in the full flow of his superhuman blame, the minister paused, and something of the man came back to him.

"I will say nothing of myself," he went on, "of—of the shame. But have you any excuse? Can you show just cause why I should not deal with you, alas!— a thousand times alas!—my brother—as a minister of God must deal with the unrepentant sinner, with the hypocrite, with the man who has defiled the innermost sanctuary of God's temple?"

There was silence. Only round Myfanwy's full lips showed a certain impatience, a weariness for this necessary fuss to subside, and leave room for common sense.

"So you have no excuse. Then prepare for the condemnation of the congregation. Prepare to be humbled to the dust before the Lord."

Myfanwy shifted impatiently. "What good will that

do? It will only humble the congregation,'' came her clear, full voice; '' It will only be a paragraph in the papers.''

Morris Pugh winced. '' I thought of that before,'' he muttered. '' God forgive me, I thought of it before—too much, perhaps. No!'' he added firmly, '' the shame must be faced! Yes, Mervyn, it must be faced, even if our mother——''

And then, with a cry, Morris Pugh himself was on his knees by the table, his hands clutching at its rim, his head between them sinking to the very dust.

'' Oh, God forgive him! Oh God, for my sake, for her sake, forgive him!—for the sake of her many prayers and tears, forgive him!''

Mervyn stood pale as death. Alicia, her little part long since played, sobbed softly in a corner; only Myfanwy looked at them all three almost with distaste.

'' Mervyn is very sorry, I am sure of that—it could not have been worth all this—this fuss,'' she said hardly; '' but why should shame be faced when—when every one is dead and buried? Mervyn can go away.''

'' The living and the dead are one, woman, in the sight of the Lord!'' replied Morris, his righteous wrath re-aroused by her words. '' Mervyn may go if he likes, but I, his brother, will denounce him before the congregation.''

His lips, his hands, were trembling, but his voice was firm.

Mervyn sat down on the sofa again and covered his handsome face with his hands. His mind was in a whirl, its chief thought being abject remorse for his brother's sake—for his mother's.

'' It is best so, Myfanwy,'' he muttered hoarsely; '' Go—it—it is all I can do for—for them now.''

She took up her cloak and hat without a word. There was no use in trying to persuade people when they were so exalted.

'' Yes, I will go,'' she said, '' but you are very silly, Mervyn. Come, Alicia! You have done enough mischief for one day, I am sure.''

Alicia followed her meekly, feeling not in the least ashamed of the rôle she had played; for these violent emotions were to her part of the religious stock-in-trade. By and by they would quiet down, Mervyn would make a noble confession, and eventually he would rise superior to all these troubles; above all, rise superior to Myfanwy.

The girls did not say one word to each other as they went back to the village together. Any one meeting them might have judged them the best of friends; only as Myfanwy branched off to the smith's cottage she paused a moment to say with a smile—

"Some day I will pay you out for this, Alicia Edwards—so, mark my words, you will pay!"

"May you be forgiven, Myfanwy Jones," retorted Alicia with spirit; "I have but done my duty."

Left alone by themselves the brothers reverted of necessity to more humble, more homely relations. The righteous wrath gave place to real grief, the blank, hopeless remorse to real regret.

By the time that the housekeeper came in to clear away the almost untouched tea, they had both accepted the position in so far as it could be accepted. There was nothing for it but to face this public confession, and by so doing make what reparation could be thus tardily made. Mervyn, indeed, was by far the more cheerful when the time came to say good-night. He had barely had time to think; the relief of having touched bottom, as it were, was great; he felt, in fact, as a repentant criminal might do on his last night on earth, as if the morrow which was to bring expiation must also bring pardon and peace.

They had spent the evening together on the highest possible plane of religious exaltation, and it was Mervyn who gripped his brother's hand and said "Courage!" out of the fulness of his emotion. His face looked almost saintly as he said it.

An hour later, indeed, when Morris—who had lingered near the dying fire, beset, now he was alone, by almost unbearable grief—looked in to see if his brother were

asleep, he found him lying like a child, smiling in his dreams.

Morris gave a faint sob, and Mervyn stirred in his sleep. "Mother," he said hurriedly, softly—"Mother, dear, dear mother—I must."

Instinctively Morris blew out the light he held, lest it might wake the dreamer from his dream; so in the moonlight he stood, torn asunder by love and grief, watching the dim peaceful form upon the bed.

Suddenly he turned and, closing the door silently behind him, went downstairs once more. Outside the narrow walls of the house, the moonlight slumbered peacefully upon the everlasting hills. Surely somewhere beyond the narrow walls of this world's judgment slept eternal Peace.

An instant afterwards the front door closed softly, and Morris Pugh, leaving his brother asleep, had gone to find wisdom where he had often sought it of late in the temple not made with hands.

It must have been an hour later that Mervyn woke, roused by a pebble at his window. He sat up with blurred consciousness, wondering vaguely what it was, until another pebble struck the pane, and a voice cried in a soft whisper, "Mervyn!"

Myfanwy! by all that was strange! Then in a second the whole memory of what had happened came back to him; but it came back to find him, as it were, a giant refreshed with sleep. None of us are really the same for two consecutive hours, and many a man will brave that in the morning, from which he would shrink at night. And there, as he peered through the curtain, was Myfanwy, sure enough, beckoning to him to come down. A sight sufficient to bring combativeness to any young blood, even without those two hours of blessed rest in sleep.

"Mervyn," she said, when five minutes after, their lips met in a long kiss; "I have come for you. See how I love you, to do this thing which might ruin any poor girl's reputation. You have done wrong, my poor boy,

very wrong; but so have many of the others who are so saintly. And why should you stay to be prayed over by them—by Alicia Edwards too! I will not have it! There will be no more *me* if you stop, Mervyn. Come now with me to Blackborough, the waggonette is waiting up the road at the bridge; we can catch the three o'clock mail at Llanilo. If you come, Mervyn, I will marry you in three days at the registrar's office."

"But," he gasped, half-drunk with her kisses, half-stunned by his remembrances.

She stamped her foot. "You must decide. I cannot stop here all night, some one may come. Oh! Mervyn! Mervyn! do you not feel that you were not made for this narrow life? You—you are no worse than others, and you have brains. You can make money if you will in the world, but not here."

Those two hours of blessed sleep! How they had obliterated that stress of over-wrought emotion, and how his young blood leapt up in assent. But Morris——

Her instinct was keen—"And see you, Mervyn, it will be better for Morris, too! If you go, why should he speak? What is confession without a culprit? Come! you can write to him from Blackborough. Come—or there is no more me for you from to-night."

When Morris Pugh returned from the temple that is made without hands an hour later, the house lay very still in the moonlight. He paused at his brother's door to listen. There was no sound. So he passed on to his own room, took his father's Bible, his mother's picture, the few odd pounds he had in the house, and so passed downstairs again to the writing-table in the study, where he had thought out so many sermons, so many appeals to his wandering flock. But it was neither a sermon nor an appeal which he set down on paper and left lying where Mervyn would see it next morning. Rather was it a confession, for this is how it ran:—

"Wisdom has come to me among the eternal hills, brother. Go your way. Be one of the saints in light. I will go mine since I cannot stay and remain silent. May

God in His mercy preserve you always from the judgment of men, and give you His Grace.''

It lay there all night with the moonlight shining on it. Then the moonbeams faded and the greyness of the false dawn found it lying there still.

But the breath of the real dawn winning its way through the door opened by the housekeeper who came to set the room in order, tilted it into the waste-paper basket, whence swiftly it made its way to the fire by the hands of tidiness.

Thus Mervyn would have had no chance of seeing it, even if he had been there.

But he was not.

CHAPTER XIX

PETER RAMSAY put down the letter with a low whistle and stood staring at his half-packed portmanteau. Then he took up the letter again and re-read it.

There was no doubt about it! The governing body of St. Helena's Hospital for Children offered him the appointment of resident physician at a salary of £600 a year.

But where the deuce was the hospital?

Egworth. That was one of the suburbs of Blackborough; the most desirable suburb, for it stood on a hill, and so above the smoke-pall of the factory city. But he remembered no hospital there. Once upon a time some speculator had built a huge framework of a place that was to have been a hotel, or a hydropathic, or something of the sort, on the site of the old manor house at the very top of the rise. He remembered Phipp's Folly, as it was called, with its cold deserted look-out of roughly-glazed windows; but of hospitals—nothing.

It must be some small place. Yet still £600 a year was liberal.

"If you would prefer to see the hospital before making a decision the authorities will be happy to show you over, and I may mention that the governing body will be in committee on the 18th of this month, and could give you an interview."

Thus wrote the secretary.

The 18th? That was to-day. The letter had been delayed, partly because he had changed his lodgings, partly because he had run out of town from Saturday to Monday to see a friend before leaving for Vienna. Of course he could put off his journey for a day or two and still arrive easily before the date he had originally fixed.

On the other hand, as it was but a two hours' run to Blackborough, why should he not go down by the 12 o'clock luncheon train, and be back in time to start, if need be, by the Oriental express in the evening? No reason at all. He would do this, and he might find time, even if St. Helena's proved to be a fraud, to look in at St. Peter's into the bargain.

"St. Helena's Hospital," said the cabman at the station confidentially, "that'll be the no'o one as the Syndicate 'as bin makin' out o' Phipp's Folly."

Out of Phipp's Folly! So that was it; quaint certainly. "I suppose so," he replied; "they must have been pretty nippy about it."

Cabby's face fell. "Nippy," he echoed, "Nippy ain't in it. They've 'ad workmen over from the States and fitters from Germany, an' a regular cordon round the place to prevent union men havin' a look in. One thing is, it must have cost 'em a pot of money—but—but they done it! And they do say as it is fust class, and the old gardens a sight. So pop in, sir. I 'll have you there in twenty minutes, if you 'll give me three shillin'."

The three shillings were promised and Peter Ramsay spent those twenty minutes in pleasurable excitement. This was something out of the common. If it had been well done Phipp's Folly might be an ideal hospital, and there was something stimulating, something which stirred the imagination in this sudden development. Of course money could do everything, but how seldom money was spent in this way; for money in *esse* always had that postulate of more money in *posse* behind it. There was only one man he knew——

A quick wonder was checked by the swift turn of the cab through the wide open iron gates, while the new gravel of a broad semicircular sweep crisped under the wheels. But there was nothing to tell of recent work in the green lawns with their old spreading cedars, which lay between the two gates. And the façade itself! What an enormous improvement those wide balconies were, and

how useful they might be. The whole place had an air of having been in use for years, and as the cab stopped a hall porter in livery came alertly down the porch steps, followed by a hall boy. That was a trifle too much for a good thing! No! there was another cab driving in by the other gate which explained the boy.

Peter Ramsay paused to give a general look round. Certainly so far as the outside went, nothing could be more perfect. What a splendid playground for the children the garden would be sloping away in varying degrees of wildness to a real dingle at the further foot of the hill. And that glass palace attached to the left must be a winter garden. On this warm day the doors were open and Dr. Ramsay could see swings, see-saws, rocking-horses, tall flowering shrubs, and—yes! birds, actually birds feeding on the floor or flying about, apparently content.

Close to the porch against the half-basement story, he could see through the glazed doors rows of perambulators, invalid carriages, and advancing to meet him with welcoming wave of the tail was a magnificent Newfoundland dog, evidently intended to be an important factor in the establishment.

There was imagination everywhere.

"Dr. Ramsay!" came an astonished voice at his elbow. He turned to see Mrs. Tresillian pausing in the very act of giving two shillings to her cabman.

"Mrs. Tresillian," he echoed, "how—how very——"

She stepped forward and looked at him—he stepped forward and looked at her. Then with one voice they both said:

"Ned! I felt it was Ned!"

Helen Tresillian gave a sigh of relief. "I have been wondering, ever since I got this," she held out a letter, and Dr. Ramsay mechanically held out his also, "who it could be who was offering me this place of matron, and now—dear me! How silly of me not to think of Ned before. But you see I have been away in Scotland—I only came back to-day—and I had not heard any Black-

borough news since I was here before Christmas—so I could hardly guess, could I?" She cast a glance around her. "But this is Ned, of course. It is like a fairy tale. Let us go in and see it. I expect it is—perfect."

They went up the steps, solemnly followed by the Newfoundland, the hall porter, and the hall boy; but on the threshold Helen paused.

"Isn't it like a fairy tale?" she repeated. "'And in an instant there appeared a most beautiful hospital all fitted with cots and medicine bottles and nurses'—Ah! here comes one of them. How quaint—but oh! how sensible!"

It was rather a buxom little person who came out from a side-door. Something both in her fair smiling face and her dress recalled an old Dutch picture. Her neat white stockings and black rubber-soled, heelless shoes were well seen below a dark-blue cotton dress, full in the skirt, loose in the body, just fastened round the throat without any attempt at a collar, and ending short above the elbow. On her head, almost completely covering her smooth fair hair, she wore a white linen cap gathered in to tightness with a narrow tape tied at the back.

Dr. Ramsay gave a big sigh. "By George!" he murmured, "that's workmanlike if you like."

"I was to give you these," said the newcomer holding out two notes, one addressed to "Peter Ramsay, Esq., M.D., F.R.C.S., Medical Officer (designate)," the other to "Mrs. Tresillian, Matron (designate), St. Helena's Hospital, Egworth."

"It is from Ned," said Helen softly, handing him hers when she had read it. "I expect he has written you the same—I think he is certain to have written just the same."

They were in fact the same, word for word, short, and very much to the point.

"DEAR RAMSAY (OR HELEN),—I have built this hospital for you and No. 36 in the Queen's Ward. You will find him waiting for you in No. 7 overlooking the garden.

He is at present sole occupant of the hospital. I hope you will accept the responsibility of killing or curing him. If you don't I must find someone else as St. Helena's Hospital—which by the way has a permanent endowment of £200,000—cannot possibly remain without a doctor or a matron. So don't say 'No,' unless you really dislike the place. Yours,

"BLACKBOROUGH."

The tears for some reason or other came into Helen's eyes, and even Peter Ramsay winked. It was a fairy tale indeed.

"These are your rooms sir," said the little Dutch nurse, "The Governing body desire me to say they would be pleased to alter them in any reasonable way you might desire."

Peter Ramsay looked round the wide rooms whose walls were almost all cupboards, which was heated by a self-feeding stove, where the doors and drawers shut automatically, and the very wash-hand basin tilted itself empty, with a distinctly annoyed smile. "I don't believe even I could be untidy in it," he said grudgingly, "But if you will excuse me, nurse—who are the Governing Body?"

"Oh! there are several gentlemen, I believe; but I only know the one name—Lord Blackborough. I have not seen him. He is to be here to-day, however—it is their first Committee meeting, you know."

"It—it was built by a Syndicate, wasn't it?" asked Helen.

"Yes; by a Syndicate. I don't think Lord Blackborough had anything to do with it. These are your—that is, the matron's rooms."

Helen gave a little cry. They were the replica of her rooms at the Keep, even to the row of flower-pots on the window-sills and the little niche for her *prie-dieu* chair. What a memory he had—and what an imagination!

"They must have spent any amount of money over

it,'' continued the buxom little nurse, '' for everything is quite perfect—on a small scale of course—I mean in comparison with the London hospitals; but none of them, so far as I know, is half so well equipped for children. It will be a pleasure to work here.''

She threw open the door of a ward and introduced Nurse Mary, an elderly woman also in the quaintly Dutch dress.

'' There are only four cots in each ward,'' said Sister Ann, '' and they have all a wide balcony on to which the cots can be wheeled, and every ward in this part of the house is practically self-supporting.'' She threw open another side door in the landing. '' The bath-room and the nurses' room are over there and this is the pantry. There is a lift from the kitchen.''

Everything in truth was perfect, and Peter Ramsay gave a great sigh of content over the marble operating-room with its glass casing, its endless silver-plated taps, and tubes, and sprays, and levers.

'' I believe,'' he said suddenly, excitedly, '' It is a replica of Pagenheim's—yes! I am certain that is his new adjustor—'' He was deep in the mechanism in a moment.

'' There were German or Austrian workmen at it, I know,'' said Sister Ann beaming over with content, '' But it is absolutely complete, isn't it? ''

Truly it was complete in every detail. A very gem amongst hospitals, a very pearl of places where disease and death could be faced at close quarters. Yes! even to the little marble mortuary where carven biers stood waiting under the shadow of a great white cross.

'' We must see number 36,'' said Helen to Dr. Ramsay, '' It was built for him remember, as well as for us.''

The plural pronoun gave Dr. Ramsay a little thrill which he shook off impatiently.

'' That is the worst part of it,'' he said, '' I am by no means sure about No. 36.''

But the first sight of the boy who was playing draughts with his nurse in a great wide play-room with a lift from

it to the winter-garden below, set him wondering if in very truth he could not set those crooked things straight.

"The Secretary's compliments, please," said the hall porter when they found themselves back in the vestibule, "and the Governing Body will be glad to see you, when you are disengaged."

They looked at one another. They had lingered over their inspection; it was already close on four o'clock, and if the Oriental mail had to be caught Peter Ramsay must leave at the half hour.

If? . . .

It did not take him long to decide. He thought of the appeal in those words "Don't say 'No,' unless you dislike the place." He would not at any rate go to Vienna that night.

"I am disengaged now," he said, looking at Helen Tresillian, "if you are."

So they followed their guide down a passage to the right wing of the house where he knocked at a door labelled Secretary's Office. A small man sadly humpbacked, but with a quick, intelligent face and a most determined chin, rose as they entered and bowed.

"If you would kindly step within," he said, opening an inner door, "Dr. Ramsay and Mrs. Tresillian, sir."

The door closed behind them and—and——

Ned Blackborough jumped up from a comfortable chair by the fire and came forward with outstretched hands.

"By George! I was nearly asleep. What a time you've been! I thought you must have gone away disgusted."

"My dear Ned!" gasped Mrs. Tresillian, "you don't surely mean that you—you only—are the Governing Body?"

"If you will sit down and pour us out some tea," he said coolly, pointing to a little table laid out by the fire, "I will tell you what I am—or rather what I am not—for I have been most things this last month. I had no idea it would have been such a business."

He might have said he had had no idea it would cost so much money, but he did not, for to him the only use of money was to spend it. So as they drank their tea, he told them how the idea had come to him before Christmas, when Helen had first told him of No. 36 and the discussion concerning the pot of beer had begun. How he had rushed everybody, bribing everybody to unheard-of haste. Just a month, he said, from start to finish; but he had had to get bricklayers, plasterers, painters over, by wire, from the States, and buy all the fittings in Germany. It was very unpatriotic, of course, but what could one do when the Trades' Unions would only allow a man to lay one-half the number of bricks in a day that the Americans laid, and when English firms talked of Christmas Day, Boxing Day and the general holiday dislocation of trade? He never could have done it but for Woods, the little dumpity who had introduced them. The man was an old watchmaker who had lost employment through the Swiss competition, and who had had the pluck to spend his last pound or two in going over to Geneva to see how it was that the foreigner could work cheaper. He, Ned, had come across him in the park one night and had lent him—only lent him, of course, with no hope of ever seeing him or it again—a sovereign! But the fellow had come back and had repaid the sovereign! He had written a pamphlet on his views and sold it in the streets. So?—so they had joined hands, being of the same way of thinking.

"I was awfully afraid when we were down at Plas Afon, Helen," he said, "that the thing would get blown upon; what with all the telegrams and the people who came to see me."

"But you told me," she replied reproachfully, "that it was mostly about that strike at the works."

"So it was—partly," he answered with a smile. Then he looked grave. "I'll tell you what, I've been busy this last fortnight, and no mistake."

"With the strike," she asked quickly.

"Yes! with the strike," he answered after a pause.

"I went into the whole thing from the beginning, and I found that those particular factories had been working at a loss for the last three years. I showed the accounts to the men, and pointed out that under the circumstances no master could be expected to accede to a demand for a rise in wages. They wouldn't listen—I suppose, really, they couldn't listen, so I closed the works, gave them each a month's pay in their pockets, and told them I hoped they'd find a better master. I couldn't do anything else in common fairness. It comes to that in the end."

He walked to the window moodily and looked out, then turned to them with one of his sudden brilliant smiles.

"And you, good people? What have you decided; but perhaps I had better give you a short outline of what St. Helena's Hospital is to be."

"In the first place, Woods is to be the Secretary and Treasurer, and all that sort of thing, with a staff under him. There is to be no governing body, but the money will be vested in a trust, and the whole staff of the hospital shall form a general committee. This will ensure the appointment of really reliable persons all through. Sister Ann—you saw her—she has every diploma under the sun, and is as hard as nuts—is, for the present, head under you, Ramsay, of the nursing department. You are head, for the present, of the medical and surgical, with help as required, and Helen here is to boss the whole lot of you in housekeeping—it is really what you are cut out for, you know, Helen, though you did fuss over the *chauffeur* dinners."

"But I don't quite see why," began Peter Ramsay argumentatively, "all this has to be done. If it was to provide me——"

Ned Blackborough interrupted him. "It was to supply you—and the world," he said almost sarcastically—"with a place in which there were no vested interests. It was to provide you—and a few other working men and women—with a place here they could work without let or hindrance, where they were responsible for the whole show—yes! even for those who were to come after

them. Don't bring in any one, Ramsay, because he is a brilliant operator; pay him, if you like, to come in and operate, but keep your staff good men and true, who will try to secure an apostolic succession of good men and true. Then—then no one will quarrel over a pint of beer! Do you accept? "

"I accepted from the very beginning, Ned," said Helen quickly; "the moment I saw the Newfoundland dog, I——"

Ned laughed. "I thought of bringing your father's retriever; but he wasn't warranted with children—so I got that bumbler."

Peter Ramsay was taking his turn at the window, looking out with eyes that had a blur in them. Suddenly he wheeled——

"Yes! I accept, Lord Blackborough, and—and may Heaven do so and to me and more also if——"

He wrung Ned's hand instead of finishing his sentence.

Lord Blackborough threw himself into the armchair and stretched out his legs in relief.

"*Nunc dimittis*," he said, "and now for a few details. You won't be able to start, of course, for some time. The place is fairly dry, having been roofed over, you remember, but some of the partition work is a bit damp, though we've had it all dried as well as we could, and your rooms are dog dry. So is Number Seven ward. But for a while you will have to go slow. Sister Ann, Woods, and the housekeeper—I hope you will like her, Helen; if you don't give her the sack, for she will have her vote in the housekeeping committee, though of course the under servants won't—or, at any rate, only on certain points. You will find Woods has it all worked out, however, he has a head like an American roll-top desk. Well! those three can manage, so if you want any special fit-up—— Oh! by the way, I've left the instruments to you, Ramsay, except the ordinary ones. Woods has enough in hand to pay——"

"And what is to become of you, Ned," asked Helen anxiously, noting a certain jumpiness of insouciance in

her cousin's manner, a certain, almost uncanny, clearness in his eyes. "Are you going back to New Park?"

"Ye gods and little fishes! No!" he ejaculated. "Do I look, Helen, like a churchwarden, or any one else who would find comfort in Turkey carpets? I, my dear child, am going to find rest unto my soul in my own way. I—I am going to the Grecian Archipelago!"

"My dear Ned!" she laughed, "don't be so ridiculous! What *are* you going to do? You look tired!"

"Tired!" he echoed, with a quaint hint of a break in his voice; "I should think I was tired! So would you be if you had to consort with—how is it Walt Whitman puts it?—'tinsmiths, locksmiths, and they who work with the hammer, cabmen and mothers of large families.' I know now how my uncle must have felt. Excuse me, Helen, but I am a little bit harassed. You don't know what I've had to do and haven't had to do over this business; but I've got through it without any one guessing I was the syndicate. However, since I've started you, I really am off to Athens to-night. Afraid I shan't have your company on the Oriental express—ah, Ramsay? Now, as I have to see Ted Cruttenden—who is just back, I hear, from Paris—before I start, I 'll say good-bye."

"But will you catch the express?" asked Dr. Ramsay incredulously.

"I expect so. I have a special," replied Lord Blackborough carelessly.

They looked at each other after he had left the room.

"I hope he will take a rest," said Helen, still more anxiously. "I've never seen him look so—so curious—as if he were seeing visions——"

"He is a little fine-drawn," said the doctor shortly; "quiet will set him all right, I expect."

Meanwhile Ned in his motor was running close up to time-limit on his way to Ted's office. Even if he missed the express he was not going away without telling the latter that he had spoken to Aura, that she had refused him, but that—well! he had some reason for hoping she might change her mind. He would have written this had he

been able to get Ted's address in Paris, but no one knew it at the office, or at any rate they professed not to know it. Ted, however, had returned that morning, and Ned had telephoned down to him warning him to expect a visit.

So there he was in his private room, looking just a little disturbed, just a little combative; yet the Paris visit had been successful beyond his hopes. So successful indeed, that there was a really magnificent diamond ring in his breast-pocket awaiting leisure for him to take it down to Cwmfaernog.

"I'm off for six weeks—to be exact, for thirty-nine days—to Athens," said Ned, "and I wanted to see you for a moment first, because I have something to tell you—that, I think, you ought to know. I asked Aura Graham to marry me—on New Year's Day it was——"

Ted's heart gave a great thump. It made him conscious of the engagement ring, in its fine blue morocco case, in his breast-pocket.

"Yes——" he said chillily—"and—and——" He could not get his tongue to say "she accepted you," although, the instant he heard Ned's confession, he made up his mind that it must not force his hand in any way. The engagement was not yet made public; they had a perfect right to keep it secret if they chose.

"She refused me—but——" Here Ned found some little difficulty in going on, "but I am not so sure if—if she would refuse me again. That really is all I've come to say."

He looked frankly at his companion.

Ted stooped down and stirred the fire.

"Thanks. Of course that is your opinion—I—I don't agree with it; but anyhow a man can but take his chance. You take yours and I'll take mine."

"Done!" said Ned with a laugh, and they parted.

CHAPTER XX

LITTLE blue wavelets were lapping on the pure white coral dust at his feet; above his head little white cloudlets were sailing upon the pure blue of the sky as Ned Blackborough lay on the flat of his back looking out over the soft southern sea. He had edged himself away from the turf beyond the sand for fear of crushing the great drifts of tiny iris which everywhere grew encircled by their bodyguard of grey-green scimitar-shaped leaves. Whether they were actually of the same sort as the one which Aura had dubbed "the most beautiful thing in the most beautiful place in the world," Ned was not botanist enough to know; but his heart warmed to them because of their likeness to it.

But then his heart went out to almost everything in this wonder island of the Sporades group, which he had purchased for a mere song from the Turkish Government. A mere song indeed! It filled him with awe to think of becoming the possessor of so much pure loveliness, when he had spent hundreds—nay! thousands of times as much—in trying to make one house fit for children to die in!

Even as it stood, it was an earthly paradise. When he had finished spending a little more money and a good deal more leisure on it, when the white marble ruins on it were restored, when books and music came to its pleasant pavilions, above all when Love came to take up her abode there, it would be a veritable fragment of the heavenly Jerusalem chipped off and dropped here by chance in the still, deep blue sea.

Yes! it was extraordinarily beautiful! It satisfied the soul!

Straight away from the water's edge, save where here and there a coral-sanded creek broke the clear cut of the cliff, the land rose steadily, cleft by sharp ravines, to a central peak, not high, yet high enough to hold, on this early morning in February, a dusting of frosty dew upon its summit, which shone evanescently, like snow, then disappeared before the rising sunbeams as they fell.

The ilex woods were already green and bronze in their new, soft, yet spike-set shoots; the olives grew sturdily amongst the burnished leafage of the wild lemon and the wild orange, and down the ravines, where trickled scantily among the stones tiny streams of water, the oleanders were already preparing their blaze of red and white.

And the flowers! Ye gods! what flowers! It would take Aura a lifetime simply to find out their names! Every thicket showed them aburst with coming blossom; and, the open spaces, even thus early, were carpeted with fritillaries and narcissus.

And the birds! A pair of tiny sun-birds flitted past him twittering, playful, a flash of scarlet wheeling wings and ruby throats. On the rock yonder, an emerald and sapphire kingfisher sat silent, looking with large, piercing eyes out to sea.

So indeed might Halcyon have sat looking for her Ceyx! And as he watched the bird, immobile, mournful, the full beauty of the far-way Greek legend struck Ned Blackborough's mind with new force.

Ay! So must all those who love the Something they know not what, which they find, or seem to find, in some woman's beauty, some man's strength—so must they watch and wait, flitting ever over the waves of life seeking the Beloved. Not even the halcyon days when Zeus gives the wisdom of calm, could end that ceaseless quest. Aura had been right. Behind love was the " Something better " which he had felt, in which both he and she had been lost, as they had sat together, hand in hand, listening to the robin as it sang on the holly-tree.

The sun-birds flitted past again less playfully, more lovingly, and Ned Blackborough started up remembering

that it was the 14th of February—St. Valentine's day! Naturally the birds were pairing. Naturally there was spring in the air. Naturally his blood seemed to race through his veins; he also could have made love!

Fautes de mieux, why should he not send Aura a valentine? He had not written to her, he had virtually said he would not; but a valentine—especially a valentine by wire as this must be—was a very impersonal affair.

He strolled over to the rocky point, behind which, in a natural harbour, lay a fair-sized English sailing-boat. Beyond, at anchor, rode a steam yacht; but its fires were out—its crew had gone off that morning in a double lateen-sailed felucca to Rhodes for some festival—St. Valentine's day, no doubt.

But for this it would have been easy to steam over to the telegraph office.

There was the sailing-boat, however, and the weather was perfect. He looked out seawards critically. There was a certain hardness of outline in that deep blue horizon; otherwise the calm of fourteen days might well be beginning.

It would be a lovely sail. Twenty miles or so over these ripples, with just enough warm southerly wind behind one to blow the boat straight to the telegraph office without a tack! As for the return journey the felucca's crew would have to make that, and bring the yacht for him next morning. He liked Rhodes; it was a quaint old town full of memories, pagan and Christian.

Five minutes afterwards he was afloat, the sheet looped within reach, the tiller set steady towards a pale-blue cloud which lay upon the north-west horizon.

It was the most perfect of mornings. The boat lay over a trifle to the wind, which was stronger beyond the lee of the island, and sent a little half-apologetic tinkling, bubbling laugh of water along the side as it slid through the waving lines of ripple.

"Let me pass! good people," it seemed to say. "Let me laugh! I have a purpose—you have none. Ha—ha—ha!"

So, unheeding of the ripples, might the unchanging Purpose behind all things break through the little waves of the world and laugh at their disturbance.

Ned Blackborough lit a cigarette—a good sound, opium-soddened Egyptian cigarette such as his soul loved—and set himself deliberately to day-dreams. It was becoming more and more a temptation for him to do this, for he was only just beginning to realise the intense pleasure he derived from it! A sensual, purely æsthetic pleasure for the most part, though every now and again. . . . Yes! every now and again he left even the super-sensual part of him behind, and lost himself utterly. In what, he did not know. He only knew that *It* was there, and *He* was forgotten.

To-day, however, he was in no mood for the infinite; the finite was quite sufficient for him, so he amused himself by looking steadily at the shining dark surface of some bilge water which lay by the tarred keel of the boat, and trying to imagine that he would see visions in it, as the little Cairo boys see them in a drop of ink.

He had tested this often, and knew that they did see strange things, just as Helen apparently had seen the fire on Cam's point in the crystal. Truly there were many mysteries!

It was, of course, not hard to conjure up Aura's face, or see her seated in the sheep shelter listening to the bird, or standing in the moonlight among the cedar shadows on the lawn holding out the sovereign, or on her knees beside the little purple iris while the sphinx looked down on her.

But beyond all these tricks of memory, what could he see? Nothing. Yet what was this? A wide stretch of blue—blue everywhere. Bah! it was only the reflection of the sky; it was the floor of heaven!

His eyes narrowed themselves from dreaminess to thought. It was strange that that inner eye, which could produce things from the past with such absolute accuracy, should be so helpless in regard to the present ex-

cept in negation. It could make one forget that altogether.

As for the future? Truly the mind of man dreamt idly when it sought to discover what lay beyond; possibly because it sought to recognise itself in conditions in which Self should have been merged in something beyond Self.

So as he sat idly looking at the drop of dark water, he felt for a moment—aided, no doubt, by the opium in his cigarette!—as if he were sailing on over a sea that vibrated ceaselessly with a soft quiver which brought no sensation of light to his eyes, no sense of feeling to his touch, no sense of sound to his ears.

And the old Indian definition recurred to him—"A bubble upon the Ocean of Bliss."

The sharp rug of a running rope recalled him to the present; the loop of the sheet was slipping as the breeze freshened.

It was freshening indeed. Behind him lay quite a squall, crisping the ripples to little indignant waves, and over in the south-east a cloud, pale-grey but threatening, already showed as a widening arch from the horizon. One of the swift spring storms was coming up apace, and he must run for it for all he was worth. There was no more time for dreams; every ounce of the squall that goes before the storm must be made use of if he was to send his valentine.

But he would send it safe enough, unless the wind shifted. After a while, during which the boat, hard held, flew through the waves, and the blue cloud to the northward rose higher and higher on the horizon, the wind did shift just at a point or two towards the south, and he in his turn had to shift his tiller so as to keep that extreme north-eastern headland before him. So it became a harder tussle than ever between him and the wind to keep full way on the boat. She was carrying more sail than was safe, but he could not afford to lose a moment of time; although, all things being equal, he had still a fair chance of making the land.

Another slight shift! and now before him—a gleam of light on the land that was already shadowed by the coming storm—he saw a creek of white sand slightly to westward of him, where he could at least have a chance of beaching his boat, where, for the matter of that, if the worst came to worst, he would at least have a better chance of not being dashed to pieces if he tried to swim. Beyond, the coast was cliff-bound, rock-bound.

Would she take so much? He let the sheet slip through his fingers half inch by half inch, gauging the wind's pressure on the sail cautiously. Yes! she would take it. He could make the creek if all went well.

But he had reckoned without the current which here, close to the land, began to gather itself for a headlong race round that eastern cliff; so inch by inch the boat's prow slid from the white streak of safety to the rocks.

Would she stand another inch of rope?

She stood it, and leapt forward like a greyhound, giving to the full sweep of the storm which at that moment, with a crash of thunder, broke over them; then righting herself and careering before it like some mad thing, her way redoubled by the fierce wind which sang in Ned's ears, as, clinging to one taffrail with his hand, he stood almost on the other. There was no time now even for thought; the feeling of fight came in its place, since to steady the tiller for the creek one moment, and give to the huge rollers the next, was enough for soul, and brain, and body.

Then on the crest of a wave he saw the creek in front of him, but saw also that a giant roller just behind him must swamp the boat unless he steered straight towards the rocks on the north-east. They were sharp, jagged rocks, like teeth just showing above the boil of the waves. How far out did the reef run? What length was that ravening jaw?

Who could say? The next instant, with his boots kicked off, and the thwart, on which he had kept an eye this while past, held under his arm-pits by his out-

stretched arms, as a buoy, he had leapt into the roller as it lifted the boat. The water felt warm to him, spray and wind-chilled as he was; warm, but rough, as it seized him, ducked him, cuffed him, bruised him; all but broke him, ere with a mighty rush it flung him forwards. Ye gods! what it was not to be quite sound—to have an arm that could not stand a strain! Still that awful something against which he had struck in the downdraw had been warded off somehow and . . .

Then once more the following roller, stronger of the giant twins which hunt the wide wastes of water in couples, overtook him, caught him, buffeted him, knocked him senseless, so, with a wild shrieking scramble of pebbles and coral sand, swept him up to the very last corner of the creek. His head, as he lay stunned, was within an inch of a jagged needle-point of rock which would have crashed into his skull as if it had been an egg-shell.

It was full five minutes ere another giant wave reached out for him and felt him about the feet. But by this time that was enough to rouse him. He stirred, sat up, and half-mechanically withdrew himself stiffly beyond any further touch. He was bleeding from cuts in the hands and on his knees; but that seemed to be all the damage done.

Except for the boat, of course . . . What of the boat? It was matchwood already amongst those devilish rocks to the eastward.

"That was a nearish squeak," he murmured softly as he rose, and limping a little, sought shelter among the clefts of the cliff from the blinding torrents of rain.

An hour or so afterwards, however, having with easy grace and some small knowledge of Turkish and modern Greek hired a gaily caparisoned mule from a neighbouring farmer, he rode up the Knights' Street quite cheerfully, dried and warmed by the sun, which, after the brief storm, had shone out again radiantly, carelessly.

He had settled what the valentine was to be from the very moment that the idea of it had entered his head, but it took him fully half an hour to see it safely through the

hands of the Turkish officials, and then they charged him for a message in cipher.

Yet it was only a very simple quotation:—

> 'Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
> Like to the lark at break of day uprising
> From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.'

He did not even put his name to it, for it seemed impossible to him that she should not know who sent it.

By this time it was close on four o'clock, and he computed the difference in longitude by his watch.

"She ought to get it at latest by four," he said to himself as he strolled off to the old church to live awhile amongst the ghosts of the Crusaders and the Knights Hospitalliers of St. John.

As a matter of fact it was a quarter to four when the brick-dust coloured envelope was put into Aura's hands, but she was still looking at it with a certain scare in her eyes and a certain flutter at her heart when Ted came down from her grandfather's room at four o'clock. Of course she knew who had sent it. No one but Ned would have thought of anything at once so consoling and so disturbing. To rise from earth and "sing hymns at heaven's gate" was quite in order; but how about the "Haply I think on thee"?

"What's that?" asked Ted kindly, as he sat down beside her on the sofa, which had been imported into the bare, empty room for the invalid's use. "Anything I can do?"

That again was so like him; always thinking of material help in everything.

"Nothing," she replied, hurriedly crumpling up the per, and thrusting it under the sofa cushion. "Nothing, at least of any consequence." She was wearing the diamonds now, and they flashed on her finger, bringing the sunburn brown of her hand into greater prominence. "You look worried, Ted," she went on. "You don't think grandfather is worse, do you? He was very disturbed, I know, but——"

Ted shook his head. "Not worse, certainly. I left him asleep. Besides, the doctor says there is no immediate danger of any sort. But I am worried. The fact is, my darling"—his arm was round her, but not too aggressively, for, in truth, though he loved her dearly, his world held many other interests besides love—"this sort of thing cannot go on. This is the third time I have been sent for since the New Year. I don't grudge it, dearest, one bit. There is always the joy of seeing you; but if Hirsch hadn't been kindness itself I couldn't have managed it. And it doesn't really do the dear old man any good. Here he is to-day fretting himself ill about my having to go away, about our being married. So I was wondering, dearest——"

"Yes, Ted," she put in calmly.

Ted took his arm away, and sat resting his head in his hands and looking vexedly into the fire. "It is a good deal to ask of us—especially to ask of you," he went on; "but you see I must go off this evening, so it wouldn't make any real difference, since we are bound indissolubly to each other as it is—aren't we?"

He took her left hand and kissed the diamond ring as he spoke.

"Of course we are," she assented. "Go on, Ted."

"So—if you will consent—I could fetch the rector—he is a surrogate, I find; but, as a matter of fact, I got the license at Blackborough—and we could be married before I go. Don't look so startled, my dearest! It shan't be if you don't wish it. And I hate asking for it, only I believe it would really quiet the dear old man, and give him a better chance—and me too, of course, for this sort of thing is a little—just a little—well! limiting. And, as I say, it would make no difference—except perhaps that I should find it harder than ever to leave my wife."

His voice sank to almost playful tenderness, his arm stole round her waist again, and she rose hurriedly.

"But—but is this possible?" she asked incredulously. "I thought there was so much formality——"

He smiled tolerantly. "Not at all! a special license is all that's required, and I have that; so if you—you dear, solemn thing!—will really consent to do without a wedding——"

She looked at him, startled. "But surely we *are* going to be married?"

He laughed loudly. "Of course we are. I meant the bridesmaids and the cake and the orange-blossoms and all that. I don't want them, darling, if you don't. It's enough for me to have you."

She set the question and his kiss aside as of no value whatever. "Then I think you had better get the rector if you can, Ted," she said thoughtfully. "I expect it will make a great difference to him—to grandfather, I mean—and to you also. And you've been so awfully good! Will you tell grandfather?" she added with a little blush as she released herself from her lover's thanks.

"Well, you see," he confessed, "I've half-promised him already—that is why he went to sleep. You are always so reasonable, Aura, I felt I might count on you——"

And then the sight of her standing there so sweet, so kind, so absolutely unconscious, seemed to overwhelm him, and he cried passionately, "Oh, my dear, my dear! I hope I shall make you happy—but you are a thousand times too good for me."

He told himself so over and over again as he hurried on his bicycle to the rectory, and he swore to himself almost incoherently that although the rush of mere money-making had absorbed much of his waking life, it should never invade the corner that was sacred to his love. And as he said this he turned his head suddenly towards the winter woods, for in his ears that mellow blackbird call to the wilds seemed to sound, as it had sounded that evening when, all unwitting, he had sold his soul to Mr. Hirsch.

When he had gone on his mission Aura drew out Ned's valentine again, smoothed it over, and looked at it once more. For the first time in her life she felt the need

of some one—some woman to whom she could talk. Finally she folded up the telegram, put it on the mantelpiece, and went into the kitchen. There was always Martha, and Martha's sound common-sense was a byword.

"Martha," she said, after standing for a few moments watching the deft hands dab butter over paste, and roll it in with swift decision—it was almost like watching the mill which grinds small! "I want to ask you something; but you must promise not to mention it even to Adam."

"Even to Bate!" echoed Martha with a sniff. "If I'd my choice, Miss H'Aura, I'd as lief mention it to the town-crier. Not that Bate doesn't mean well. It ain't his fault being born so; but there, one must just take holt of men as they're made, and be thankful they is no worse."

Why this should have heartened Aura up it is hard to say, but it did. She actually smiled. "What I wanted to ask was this, Martha. In your experience—do you think it hurts a man very much to be in love—I mean, of course, to be in love with some one who doesn't want—I mean who won't marry him?"

Martha poised the rolling-pin on one hip, her hand on the other.

"Hurt 'em!" she echoed. "Lord sakes, no! It's the makin' o' them. Bate wouldn't be 'alf so spry at his years if he 'adn't bin wantin' to marry me any time this fourteen year back. That's why I won't 'ave him even now, Miss H'Aura. 'Bate,' says I, 'if I was to take you now, you'd get fat an' lazy. You wouldn't rise no more. You'd be like whipped eggs as is let stand, all gone to froth an' water.' No! Miss H'Aura, men is like heggs, they want beatin' 'ard all the time, else they'll never rise to better things."

The rolling-pin came down on the pastry with more decision than ever, and Aura laughed out loud. Something in the very phrasing of the last words comforted her.

Yet she was not quite content as she changed her day-dress for the white cambric one she wore in the evening;

after all, it was but putting it on an hour or so before her usual time, and the Mechlin lace about her throat was a concession which would please her grandfather.

"Aura!—my dearest, you look quite bridal," exclaimed Ted, as he came in to find her sitting by the firelight. "It seems too good to be true—but the rector will be here in half an hour." He knelt down beside her, and laid his head in her lap. "My dear, my dear!" he said almost with a sob. "I don't seem able to say anything but *that*, somehow," he added almost pathetically. Far away, dimly, he saw a vision of something better, unattainable, incompatible with his sensuous life. It was beautiful but—what would you? Man is but man; and he must have money wherewith to live.

"Then there is something which I must tell you—before," she said; "it is something which I think you ought to know. Ned asked me to marry him on New Year's Day—and I refused."

Ted's heart gave a great throb as it had done when Ned Blackborough had used much the same words nearly a month before.

"I—I am sorry for Ned," he said softly, "but I don't see——"

For answer she held out the telegram. "He sent me this to-day," she said, "and I wonder—if he is waiting."

"Waiting!" echoed Ted hotly. "Waiting for what? You say you refused him?"

"Yes! I told him I would not marry him—because I was afraid of loving him too much; that was the truth."

For one instant the whole room seemed to spin round with Ted; he had to steady himself by holding to the back of a chair.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said thickly.

"I don't think he did either," she replied with a lingering regret in her voice, "for he said he would ask me again in two months, as if that would alter anything."

Ted caught swiftly at the ray of light. "Then if he asked you again—you—you would refuse him?"

The firelight had died down so that he could not see the

flush which surged into her face, but he could hear her voice as she replied, "Yes! I should refuse him—more than ever."

"Then," he said slowly after a pause, "I don't see why you need bother——"

"Oh! it was not that," she put in quickly. "I was only wondering—you see I know so little, and I have no mother—if he would expect me to wait."

The firelight flared up again, and he saw her with the lace about her throat. "Let him wait!" he exclaimed passionately; "he had his fair chance and I have mine. I am sorry, but one of us had to win. You can't help that, you poor little dear—that is fate."

He told himself it was indeed fate: he swore to himself that he would be the best husband ever woman had.

But for all that the ceremony damped even his joy. To begin with, Martha wept copiously in a corner, as she had wept ever since Ted had gone in to the kitchen and taken her away unceremoniously from her pastry-making as a witness. At first she had sunk into a chair, and steadfastly refused to budge (on the ground that she couldn't "'ave sech things going on in the 'ouse," but after a time the importance of being in possession of a dead secret, and her perception that if his lordship was not going to come forward—and he seemed, indeed, inclined to play the back step—this was decidedly the next best thing for her darling, induced her to yield.

"And if you loves 'im and 'e loves you, there ain't no fear, same as there ain't no fear but what good barm and good flour'll make a good batch o' bread—no fear at all my deary dear," she had sobbed consolingly to Aura, who stood quite composed, but very white. Ted, strong and kindly, clasped her hand, and what soul was left over and above his bargain was in his eyes.

The rector, in biretta and cope, read the service unabridged, while Sylvanus Smith, propped comfortably in his arm-chair, averted his face from the sacerdotal symbols, even while he added an unctious "Amen" of his own to "let no man put asunder."

He even essayed a burst of hilarity as he kissed Mrs. Cruttenden, but Ted scarcely availed himself of his privileges. He only stood beside Aura, holding her hand, divided in his heart of hearts whether he should go or whether he should stay.

But in the end prudence triumphed and a sense of duty; for the last month of constant interruptions had not been favourable to business, and if Aura—if his wife—were ever to appear in that pink satin and diamonds, it behooved him to bestir himself.

So Adam Bate, coming in after milking the cows at eight o'clock, found the house silent, curiously silent, with Martha seated on a chair, her feet on the fender, her eyes on the fire.

He cast a glance at the table. It was bare; so after a while he coughed.

"Beant there no supper, Martha, woman?" he asked apologetically.

Martha rose in an instant, aflame.

"There's bin that, Adam Bate, a-goin' on in this 'ouse this day, as no one didn't want to 'ave no supper—not if they was Christian—but bein' a man—there's bread and cheese in the cupboard."

CHAPTER XXI

MARCH had come in like a lion. Even in the village of Dinas, sheltered as it was, the east wind swept down the funnel of the valley and through the very houses, as only an east wind in Wales can sweep, bitter, absolutely unsparing of man or beast.

Alicia Edwards gathered her cross-over shawl closer to her as she stood in her father's shop and listened for the click of the telegraph instrument. It was almost the only amusement she had now, and any moment might bring the wire for which Adam Bate and the housekeeper at Cwmfaernog had been calling in vain these two days past.

It was becoming serious. They would have to bury the poor, dead gentleman after all, if some one did not come to help them to arrange—the other thing. For in this far away Welsh village, where every boy and girl had been educated up to the standard set by the most advanced progressivists of the day, the very idea of cremation was absolute damnation. It could be nothing else, since how could the Creator resurrect a body that did not exist? So half the village thought it only right that such an atheist as Mr. Sylvanus Smith had been in life should meet the fire without delay, and the other half, more mercifully inclined, explained the difficulty in getting hold of Mr. Cruttenden, the dead man's executor, as symptomatic of pity on the part of Providence.

Alicia Edwards, thinking over this, sighed. It was only one more case in which the teaching of school ran counter to the knowledge that was necessary in daily life. For what would her father, the elder, what would she herself say, if she was to allow even elementary science

to interfere with her belief? The world was a very confusing place. There was but one certain thing in it for a woman, and that was love; but every one could not get love. She thought of her own struggle for it and her failure. Myfanwy had beaten her. She had reft Mervyn away even from his great vocation, and rumour had it that, after a little longer service in Williams and Edwards's shop, those two would be married and set up in a small business of their own. In face of this, what did all the rest matter? Despite all the talk in the village concerning Mervyn's sudden departure and Morris Pugh's equally sudden resignation of the pastorship of Dinas, she had held her tongue with fair discretion, only allowing a few mysterious surmises to leak out. To begin with, Myfanwy's last words had alarmed her, and then the offenders had passed altogether from her control. What would it matter to Mervyn, now employee in Williams and Edwards, if it was found out that he had ruined half the girls in Dinas?

Besides, something new and stern in her father's attitude towards her in regard to the revival made her suspect that he was not without his suspicions. The less said about morals the better, especially since the effect of those midnight meetings was already making itself felt in the immediate neighbourhood. For Isaac Edwards was relentless on this point. He had downright refused to let her go on with her sweet singing now that all her companions had died or disappeared; so having, of course, lost her post as pupil teacher, there was nothing for it but to stop at home and prepare, so her father said, for a normal college. The girl herself stiffened a sullen lip and looked down the lane which led to the minister's house now occupied by the Reverend Hwfa Williams; for he admired her. Of that there could be no question. The possibility of marrying him, indeed, had become quite a factor in her life, and she decided most points with a view to this possibility. Small wonder then if Alicia Edwards's amicability and her general desirability as a minister's wife had begun to strike Hwfa Williams

himself, while even Isaac Edwards was beginning to waver in his insistance on Logarithms and the Science of Tuition.

"Put on your hat, Alicia," he said from his ledger, "and run down the road. It will warm you up before you have to go to the Bible class."

And Alicia went, nothing loth. It was better battling with the wind than watching for telegrams which never came, especially when there was the chance of coming back with the wind and with a man whose pale, heavy, dark-browed face was beginning to become to you, by diligent care and concentration, the handsomest in the world.

So she fought her ground steadily against the swirling clouds of dust.

Had she only gone up the hill over the short, springy grass and the broken brown bracken she would have enjoyed the wind, as Ned Blackborough was enjoying it on his way to Cwmfaernog. For it was the 1st of March, the day on which he had promised Aura he would return and ask her once more to marry him. He had come back from the East but the day before, and being, so to speak, made up of impulses, moods, fancies, in the indulgence of which he had of late sought his chief pleasures, he had determined to find his way to her, as he had found it that very first night, over the summit of Llwydd y Bryn, the "Eye of the World."

Such fancies hurt no one, but he was beginning to realise that in them lay all the salt of life. What was it to the world, absorbed conventionally in the sordid sleep which follows perforce on sordid money grubbing, if he found the highest rhythm of life in the quiver of the moonlit woods? Nothing. Let those see who had the eyes to see.

So when, a bit wearied with his climb, he sat down where he had carelessly put out his hand to catch the flying footsteps of day, it struck him now, thoughtfully, that, in truth, it was all a man's life, all he could do towards gaining happiness. He must just catch at the

flying footsteps of something unseen. Ever since the day when death had so nearly overtaken him while he was studying life in a black drop of water, he had been haunted at times by that feeling of sightlessness, touchlessness, soundlessness which had come to him then.

It came to him now on the top of Llwydd y Bryn, though before his bodily eyes lay half the principality of Wales, spread out as if it were a map. Surpassingly beautiful too. In its way as beautiful as that island in the Ægean, now waiting ready for its mistress, for he was quite prepared to follow Aura into the wilderness if needs be. He had thought much concerning her and concerning himself during the last six weeks, and he had begun to recognise that in some ways she was right in shrinking from what she called love, as a desecration of herself and of him. The feeling, however, was due to the absolutely unnatural association in marriage of the MIND with the body. An association which was simply an attempt to find a mental fig-leaf for what either required none, or was beyond decent cover. One thing, however, seemed to him certain. Aura must both love him and also desire to marry him. Yes, she loved him, or thought she did, which to her was the same thing.

He sprang to his feet, that thought being enough to start him on any path, and, ere leaving the summit, cast one look round it, remembering gladly that it might be the last time he should see it.

All was as his recollection held it. Just a brown, peaty, stone-strewn rise, and beyond, on all sides, an immensity of sea and sky and land. Only the placard on the shieling had been damaged by the winter storms. The ultimate 6d. was gone and "ginger beer" stood alone, vaunting itself free like the nectar of the gods.

Ginger beer! That was about what it came to for the million.

With an amused shrug of the shoulders he began the descent, every step of which was beautiful, every sight in which brought to him the feeling as if he trod

on air, as if nothing in heaven or earth could trammel him again.

As he crossed the stream above the farm buildings, where on that night nine months ago they had stood and shouted, the whole steading struck him as looking forlorn and deserted, but, being sure of finding Martha in the kitchen, he went boldly through the cottage and passed through the door that was like a coal cellar's to the garden room. But this time there was no flash of blinding sunlight to dazzle him. It was almost dark, for the green sun-blinds on either side were drawn down; that, however, was surely a figure by the window.

"At last!" came Aura's voice, full of infinite relief. "I am so glad."

Swept away by the whole-heartedness of his welcome he went forward swiftly and had her in his arms, but his first touch was enough; she shrank back with a half-articulate cry of surprise and thrust him from her by force.

"Aura!" he said almost incredulously, "and you sounded—so—so glad."

"I thought—I thought you were Ted," she explained with a little sob. "I've been expecting him so long, you see."

"Ted!" he echoed, "you have been expecting him? I don't understand."

"No," she replied hurriedly in a low voice. "Of course, I forgot you couldn't." There was a faint pause, then she collected herself. "We—we were married——" This time the pause remained unbroken until coolly, almost sarcastically, the question came.

"You were married! May I ask—when?"

The darkness of those drawn down blinds was in a way a godsend to them both. It hid all expression, and it seemed to Ned Blackborough in his incredulous dismay as if he were speaking to a disembodied spirit; was he also, by some chance, a disembodied spirit?

"I—I don't remember," came her voice, all strained and curiously weary. "Oh, yes; of course I do. It was

on the 14th of February." She was just beginning to remember dates, and to recollect that this must be the 1st of March. Everything seemed to have been blotted out by her grandfather's sudden death two days before, and the impossibility of getting any answer to her telegram from Ted, Ted on whom she had learnt to rely.

Ned laughed suddenly. "St. Valentine's Day," he echoed. "So I sent you my valentine as a wedding present. If I had only known, I mightn't have taken so much—trouble—to send it off. I expect I was pretty near death when you were getting married, young lady, and I compliment you on the quickness——"

"But we were engaged, quite a long time before," she said in idle protest, for something in her seemed hammering at her head, beating into it the knowledge that she had been mean.

Once more he laughed. "May I ask how long?"

"On—on New Year's Day." He could scarcely hear what she said.

"On New Year's Day," he echoed incredulously, "impossible!" Then the conviction that, if this were so, Ted Cruttenden had—well! almost lied to him came to rouse his anger to the uttermost, and he strode towards her shadow. "But this is foolishness," he exclaimed, "You know you love me—you know you do——"

"Hush!" she cried, interrupting his swift rise in tone, "Remember, please, that my grandfather lies dead upstairs."

"Dead!" he said stupidly after a pause, "Dead! I—I didn't know. I—I am very sorry." The conventional words of sympathy came slowly as he stood, feeling baulked indescribably, done out, as it were, of his just claim to anger.

"Are there any more terrors to tell?" he asked at last recklessly. "Do you happen to be dead yourself, or has the 'coo' been killed? I beg your pardon—you won't understand the allusion——" he added hastily,

" but I must be excused; there are limits! So, I see; you took me for Ted—for your husband, save the mark! Why isn't he here?—where he ought to be? "

The sudden blame, following her own thought so closely, took Aura all unprepared. The dull grievance which had been hers all those long hours of vain waiting became suddenly acute. She dissolved into young self-pitying tears.

" I don't know," she murmured, strangling her sobs, " and I don't in the least know what to do."

For an instant Ned Blackborough felt inclined to arraign high heaven for thus robbing him of righteous wrath.

But he was a gentleman, his heart was soft, so there was nothing for it save to accept the situation with the best grace he could. And the grace came, to his surprise, with such exceeding ease, despite his ill-usage, that he had to drive himself not towards patience, but to impatience, as he listened to Aura's tale of ignorance and loneliness.

A man with money behind him, or rather money with a man behind it, can do all things save avoid vulgarity, ensure happiness, or escape death.

By the evening, therefore, Ned Blackborough was able to give Aura a most sympathetic and affectionate telegram from her husband.

" We ran him to earth in Vienna, where he had gone on business," said Ned, refraining, why he scarcely knew, from saying also that Ted had been found in a Biergarten, and that he had left strict orders that telegrams were not to be forwarded. " I got him through Hirsch, but he again was unfortunately in Paris; they have some big scoop on hand. But it is all right now, and he should be home to-morrow. As for the rest, you need not bother. It is all settled, and I will tell Martha what to expect. So I will say good-bye."

She could not stifle down the quick appeal, " Must you go? "

" Of course, I must go," he replied roughly, " I ought

never to have come, and I am sorry I did, even though I have helped you. Good-bye."

She watched him put on his greatcoat without another word, almost angry with herself for feeling so inexpressibly mean. She would have liked to tell him that she had been unable to wait, that even if she had waited her answer would have been the same; but she felt that all this must come afterwards when he had had time.

And then suddenly he turned to her again.

"I'll leave this here, I think," he said, putting a flat parcel he had taken out from his pocket on the piano, "you might while an hour or so by looking at them. It —it isn't all cussedness, Mrs. Cruttenden; I should like you to see them. I should like you to know *something* of it, once! Good-bye; throw them into the fire when you have done with them. I shall not want them again."

When he had gone she went over to the piano, and taking the packet crouched down with it beside the fading fire-light, which she stirred into a blaze. To other eyes the room might have looked inexpressibly dreary, large, bare, empty, even the very sofa, imported into it for the old man's invalid use, taken away for him when the stairs became too much for his strength. But Aura was accustomed to the bareness; it had been part of her life always.

They were sketches evidently, and on the fold of white paper, which was their last covering, Ned had written one word.

"Avilion."

She sat looking at them all, these plans and sketches of the island in the southern sea, that was to have been that Island of the Blessed, of which a glimpse only can be seen by mortals, when at sunset time the golden sea fades into the golden sky, and far away—is it land or is it cloud?—a purple shadow, tipped with rosy light into distant peaks, fades with the sky into the grey of night.

How beautiful they were! And in every one of them, in front, even of the foreground, looking out, as the painter himself must have looked out, over the blue ripples, down into the pellucid cave depths where strange

fish showed in flashes of colour, towards the leafy contours of the ilex woods, along the flower-decked lawns, or through the fluted columns of marble pavilions, stood the filmy diaphanous figure of a woman, white, immobile, mist-like with averted face.

But she knew who it was, and a lump rose in her throat as she recognised it as his dream of her.

She was not worth it! No! Behind his dream of her stood a reality that had nothing to do with her. He was seeking, and she was seeking something that had nothing to do with manhood or womanhood.

The fire blazed up fiercely, fitfully, as one by one in obedience to his request, those dreamful figures caught, flared up for a space, and then died down into little trembling sparks.

Behind them all lay Darkness and Peace. So to her as she sat holding the Dream of a Man's Love in her hands, came for the first time a glimpse of the sightlessness and soundlessness, and touchlessness, which lie beyond all earthly things.

Ned meanwhile was giving his orders to Martha in the kitchen. She was taking them, as usual, with many subservient bobs, but with a certain waveringness of voice, and an unsteadiness of eye which augured ill for her calm of mind.

"I'll do my best, your lordship," she said finally with an odd little sniff, half tears, half anger. "But what with folks going away as shud 'ave stayed, an' them as might a-gone away an' welcome stoppin' on, an' both together comin' back an' staying away, I'm like a o-ven with the door bein' open constant—not fit to bake a penny-piece."

Ned looked at her, for a wonder, distastefully.

"Do you mean," he said, "that you didn't expect to see me again?"

Martha grew red, then white. "So sure as my name's Martha Higgins," she began tearfully, "If I'd expected your lordship wasn't playin' the back-step——"

He interrupted her calmly. "I'm sorry to say it,

Martha, but I think you are a fool,'' he said calmly, and left her collapsed in a chair crying silently, not so much for herself as for him; since she had seen the tragedy of his face.

Adam Bate, coming in ten minutes later, found her so, and being diffident of his power to console, crept away again to administer comfort to a newly calved cow who was lowing for her young one.

'' Coo-up, Coo-ep, m'dear,'' he said, wisping its back with a handful of straw, '' th' shallt 'ave it for sure when th' bags full, so set th' mind to the makin' o' milk. See! there's a bit o' mangle fur 'ee, but mind 'ee ' to whom much is given of them shall much be requir-ed,' as passon says. So—' pail-full, cauf-full.' Think o' that an' din-not squander God's strength on booin'.''

He felt inclined to read some such moral lesson to Martha when he returned to find her in no better case, the fire dwindling and no sign of tea; but, as has been said, he felt diffident. So he contented himself with laying the tea, poking up the fire and putting on the kettle, accompanying these unwonted actions with the hissing noise which grooms use, apparently as an encouragement to their own ardour. Perhaps this aided him to courage; perhaps the presence of death in the house taking him back to fundamentals roused in him a revolt of vitality, a desire to secure safety in equilibrium; anyhow, after a time, he sat himself down in a kitchen chair, and scrooped it by excruciating half-inches towards Martha's, until they almost touched.

'' Martha, woman! '' he said tentatively, '' If this sort o' thing's goin' on—If you 'ums goin' to be taken, this no supper, no tea way, as you 'um bin doin' o' late—why there ain't nothin' for it but ter marry me, as doan't forgit them things.''

Martha shook her head forlornly. '' It—it'll have to come to that in the end, I sippose,'' she sobbed.

You might have knocked Adam down with a feather. After all these fourteen years to be even so grudgingly accepted as this, made him feel that the round world was

no longer sure. He sat with his mouth wide open, wondering what topic of conversation would in the future take the place of unending proposal and refusal. Then the sense that he must leave such dark things to Providence, and do his duty in the present by himself, and Martha made him ask tremulously—

"Will you name the yappy day, my darlin'? Will you, my darlin', name the yappy day?"

Martha wiped her eyes and became more composed. "Some time afore we dies, I suppose," she said with a disconsolate whimper, "I can't promise more'n that, Adam Bate—an' don't ee see the kettle bilin'."

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Ned Blackborough left Cwmfairnog he left behind him also the very desire for dreams. He remained simply a rich man with no wants save for what wealth can bring. All the rest—the capacity for imagination inclusive—was mere moonshine. For the first time in his life the pompous luxury of New Park did not offend him, he drank a bottle of ludicrously high-priced champagne for supper, he smoked a good many ludicrously highly-drugged cigarettes, not as he generally did almost unconsciously, but of set purpose, taking a solid joy in the fuddled state to which they reduced him.

He woke, of course, with a headache next morning, and having had breakfast he looked at his bank-book, a thing he had not done for months. It was not exactly exhilarating to a man who had just made up his mind to enjoy what he could as a millionaire!

But, even as he looked at the balance, something in him rose up and mocked at him. How long would this phase last? How long could this pompous acquiescence in wealth as a means of pleasure last? How could eyes that had once seen, ears that had once heard, remain blind and deaf to the only realities, the only pleasures of life?

He put the question aside in an attempt to find anything but party in the politics of the morning paper, and coming to the conclusion that they were synonymous terms, he ordered the motor and went round to Egworth to St. Helena's Hospital. Woods, the little secretary, always had a tonic effect on him, and he really wanted to see how things had been going on in his absence. He found the secretary's office full up with business, and little Wood's face keener than ever.

"It is going on all right, sir, and I have kept strictly to the lines you laid down; but it involves a good deal of—of tact and correspondence"—he pulled a file towards him and fingered it. "This, for instance, contains nothing but applications to me personally for fairly fair contracts of sorts, based on secret commission. These I answer myself, as the firms sending the suggestions are really quite respectable. The minor tradesmen, and all applications made through the servants I leave to the clerks."

"You leave to the clerks," echoed Ned thoughtfully, "and some, no doubt, never come into the office at all."

Woods shrugged his high shoulders, "One can expect nothing else. It is impossible to gauge the extent to which dislike to what they call "splitting" obtains amongst domestic servants. They will never tell on another. A great many of them, of course, refuse these monstrous suggestions for taking toll, but they would never dream of speaking to their employers about them, as they should." He sighed impatiently. "But what can you expect? Where are the fundamental principles of fair dealing taught in England? Nowhere!"

"Hullo, Woods!" remarked Ned with a laugh, "Don't throw over '*caveat emptor.*' It is the foundation stone of England's power." Then he frowned. "By the way, how are the men down at Biggle getting on—you gave them their wage every week for a month, I suppose?"

"I did," replied Woods gravely, "There is a lot of distress down there. You see it is not like a strike; you have definitely closed the works and paid forfeit on contracts. So the unions won't help. Some of these men have drifted away; but the trade is slack all over England. I won't say because of dumping; but the fact remains. It is slack."

Lord Blackborough looked at his secretary narrowly. "Woods!" he said, "what would you do?"

The keen face lit up. "Do," he echoed, "I know what I should dearly like to do—try an experiment.

There are a lot of clever men in that factory, your lordship; I should lend them the capital to run the concern at one and a half per cent. interest, and—and await the result. Either way it would be an object-lesson."

"It would pay me," said Lord Blackborough, "if the state of affairs is to remain as bad as it has been. I'll—I'll see about it, Woods. Then I may take it that the hospital is really working on the lines I laid down?"

Woods coughed. "We are all very much on the lookout for fraud, your lordship," he said meekly, "but there must always be a percentage of error, so long as every one wishes to coin his neighbour into golden sovereigns."

"And that will be always, Woods," remarked Lord Blackborough with a laugh, "I believe it to be an entrancing occupation, and I mean to try it myself."

He sought out Helen after this, and found her also up to the ears in business.

"It is a terrible responsibility, Ned," she remarked, "and I am afraid I have to deluge poor Mr. Woods with references; but really I cannot trust to any one—I mean outside the hospital. Within it we are a picked lot and we do—fairly well."

The doubtful praise fell almost wearily from her lips.

"And how is No. 36?" he asked.

She brightened up. "Going on, Sister Ann says, splendidly. Dr. Ramsay operated on him a fortnight after we started, and it was a complete success. The doctors from St. Peter's were over seeing him yesterday, and even they allowed it was splendid."

"And how about the expenses; will the parents pay anything reasonable for board?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Woods says you cannot expect it. You see the children get their education free, very often their dinners free; so why shouldn't they get cured by charity? There isn't much responsibility left to poor parents now-a-days. It—it doesn't pay."

"And Ramsay?" asked Ned with a smile. "I hope his shirts are in decent order."

She flushed up a brilliant carmine. "Has Dr. Ramsay been complaining?" she asked.

"Great heavens above! No!" exclaimed Ned aghast. "Has it come to that?—no—I haven't seen him yet."

"Perhaps you had better ask him yourself," she said coldly. Then she looked at him. "And about yourself, Ned. You've told me nothing."

"Because, dear," he replied lightly, "there is nothing to tell. By the way, have you heard that Aura Graham married my friend Ted Cruttenden on Valentine's Day? You hadn't? Well, it's a fact anyhow; and she has just lost her grandfather."

"Ned!" she cried rising in swift sympathy, "I—I am so sorry."

"Yes! it is rather sad," he remarked coolly. "Of course it breaks up that jolly little unconventional home. By Jove! I daresay it will have to be sold; and in that case I shouldn't mind buying it. It would remind me of rather a jolly time."

His insouciance silenced her, and he went off on his tour of inspection to Sister Ann, whom he found in the convalescent ward, very spic and span, very precise and satisfied.

"He has not had a single drawback," she said glancing complacently at No. 36, who lay looking like an angel for virtue on a wheeled bed. "If he goes on like this, he will be discharged in a month at most. Of course he will not be quite sound; he is too radically disease-sodden for that, but he will be able to make his own living and——"

"And marry," put in Lord Blackborough calmly. "It is altogether a most satisfactory business."

Sister Ann looked at him doubtfully. "So far as I am concerned it is so, certainly. I disclaim responsibility after a patient leaves my hospital."

"My dear Sister Ann," laughed Lord Blackborough, "I disclaim all responsibility for anything. It is the only possible way of feeling moral."

He found Dr. Ramsay looking a trifle *egaré* in a room

of surpassing tidiness. Helen's hand was visible also in the doctor's dress. He had nothing but good to report in every way except that he had found it extremely difficult to ensure a supply of absolutely undeniable drugs.

"It is not that any one deliberately means to cheat, but that the real thing is so difficult to get," he remarked ruefully. "You see, if a fellow sells wine or spirits that isn't genuine he can be run in; but you may kill half a dozen babies by selling stale ipecacuhana wine or any other filth and no one asks questions."

He was loud in praise of his assistants, the secretary, Sister Ann. Each and all were first-class.

"And Helen—Mrs. Tresillian, I mean? " asked Ned drily, "I hope she is satisfactory as matron."

Peter Ramsay's face showed a trifle more colour. "Satisfactory," he echoed, "she is more than satisfactory! Do you know—" his voice sank to an almost awed tone—"I believe she looks after my—my underclothes herself."

Ned Blackborough burst into a roar of laughter.

"My poor Peter! " he said, "vested interests again! It's too bad! " Then he sobered down and looked quite gravely at the doctor, who was laughing too.

"Ramsay," he said, "why don't you ask my cousin to marry you? "

"I asked her yesterday," replied the doctor gloomily.

"The devil you did! " ejaculated Ned. Vaguely all this interested him, made him forget himself. "What did she say? "

Peter Ramsay got up and walked about the room. "What did she say? It is an odd thing, Blackborough, what different ideas people have about love. I used to think it was a kind of fever that would yield to strict diet, and a saline treatment. It isn't. At least something which has got mixed up in it may be so; but—now on the other hand your cousin, who is a sensible woman, mind you, seems to me somehow to have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. She thinks—oh! hang it all I can't go vivisecting what she thinks—it's bad enough to

do it for oneself—but because she can't at nine-and-twenty feel the same—yes! I'll say it—purely physical attraction for me that she felt for that poor sick man at nineteen, she says that it is a desecration for any one even to speak of marriage to her. I often wish the good women of the world could be made to understand how purely evanescent that sort of thing is, for how little it counts in the aggregate sum of life. Here is Helen—Mrs. Tressilian—giving it first place, while other good women relegate it to the nethermost hell; and all the while they prate about love with a big L.''

'' My dear Ramsay,'' remarked Ned, '' I'll give you ten thousand a year to go about the country and preach your views—and I'll give you a thousand extra for every woman you convert to them.''

'' Quite safe,'' assented Dr. Ramsay with a growl. '' I should be lynched before my first quarter's salary was due.''

'' Meanwhile you will stick to it—and manage? ''

'' Oh! I'll manage all right. I have an A1 prescription for the febrile part of the disease—I—I should like to give it to you——''

The red brown eyes looked into the blue ones. '' Yes! '' replied Ned coolly, '' she has married the other fellow because, no doubt, love seemed to her to be the devil. You are about right, Ramsay. Women are *impayable* in that connection. Good-bye.''

He tried to amuse himself in a thousand ways that afternoon, but they all failed, so he took to business the next day, and went back to New Park in the evening and drank another bottle of champagne and smoked still more cigarettes.

The next day brought him a letter in an unknown hand. Was it a man's or a woman's, he wondered. A woman's surely, since the black-edged envelope smelt horribly of scent as he opened it.

Aura Cruttenden! The signature gave him quite a shock. The idea of her using either black-edged paper or scent revolted him, but the letter was—passable.

"DEAR NED," it ran, "I suppose I ought to call you Lord Blackborough, but I can't. I shall never forget you. You have taught me, I think, everything I know that's worth knowing. Perhaps ever so long ago you and I were the same Amœba. What are we going to be in the end. That is the question. Don't—don't quarrel with us, please.—Yours,

"AURA CRUTTENDEN."

"Don't quarrel!" That was all very well; but what else was there to do? It was impossible for him to go on drinking champagne and smoking cigarettes till he died.

Finally, he tried London and a round of the theatres and music-halls. He amused himself immensely and was never for one instant content. He played bridge at the club, and went no trumps until a choleric old gentleman remarked that it was no wonder he had such a dislike to the Day of Judgment. Whereupon he laughed and played no more. Then he sought out Mr. Hirsch, and went gold-bugging in the city, but after dining *en petit comité* with many Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics at every smart set restaurant in London, at every one of which Mr. Hirsch called the waiters by their names as if they were his own servants, he gave it up in sheer disgust, and tried to feel an interest in the Grand National, even to the extent of allowing himself to bet freely with his friends. He did everything in fact that a man can do to please himself, short of buying cheap or dear kisses; and even that he might have done, being for the time quite reckless, but for the fact he was soul-weary of womanhood, her ways and works. Finally he went back to Blackborough and felt the first really keen and natural emotion of which he had been capable for a month, when he met Ted Cruttenden by chance in the street.

"I hope your wife is quite well," he said sedately, feeling then and there a desire to throttle his successful rival. It was a most wholesome feeling, he recognised,

for it sent the blood coursing through his veins once more in honest antagonism to something of which he disapproved. Ted seemed to feel this antagonism pierce through him, decorously dressed in a black business suit though he was, for he said hurriedly—"Oh! all right. Won't you come into the office for a moment. I—I should like to speak to you."

Ned, regarding himself once more from the outside, felt vaguely amused, and acquiesced.

"Of course," began Ted, for his part feeling absolutely a somewhat ill-used and thoroughly misunderstood man, "I know the whole affair must seem, as it were underhand; but—" he looked doubtfully at his companion as if uncertain how much he knew, before resolving on the whole truth as safest. "I suppose you know now, or guess, that when you came here last Aura and I were engaged. Well! it was so. Your coming and telling me you had asked her, put me in an awful hole for I had no right, on my part, to tell you—anything. The whole affair was strictly private, I hope you understand."

"I understand that you wished it to be private," remarked Ned clearly.

"It had to be, my dear fellow," replied Ted eagerly. "To begin with, we were engaged rather hurriedly in order to please her grandfather—chiefly; and I—I felt I had no right to presume on it; it might never have come to anything. It couldn't for a long time, for I wasn't in a position to marry." Here his face fell, and he threw down the pen with which he had been fiddling in sudden impatience. "For the matter of that, I'm not in it now. These confounded interruptions have played the dickens, and we shall have to begin in a small way; for she hasn't a penny. The place is over-mortgaged and even the furniture has to be sold. In fact, if it doesn't realise a decent price, I might be let in. Where was I? Oh! yes. Then in February, just as I was in the throes of a really good thing, I was telegraphed for again. I had been down twice before, and really, only

because the old man was not satisfied, that we would keep to our engagement. So——" he paused.

"Well?" remarked Ned.

"I took down a marriage license with me—it was absolutely necessary, you see, that I should get away again as soon as I could, and I thought, if the worst came to the worst, it would calm the old man to feel that we were married. So you see there was no time to give any one any notice."

"And you were married," remarked Ned again in the same clear, hard voice.

"Yes! The rector married us in the old man's room, with Martha and him as witnesses, half an hour before I started. That is really the whole story—exactly how it came about."

"And you went back, when?" asked Ned Blackborough quickly.

"I never went back. It was awfully important that I should have a free hand, and that is how it came—about the telegrams, I mean — I had purposely left no address——"

The tapping of Ned's stick on the floor, which had been going on as he sat, his elbow on his knees, listening, ceased. "Then you mean to say," he said slowly, rising as he spoke, "that when I saw—Aura—the other day—she——" Suddenly he laughed — "Good-bye, Ted; you're not a bad sort of a chap on the whole—but you have the devil's own luck! If I had only known—if I had guessed that she——" His voice rose in sudden anger, then paused. What was the good?

"Are you going to finish your sentence, Lord Blackborough?" flared up Ted in anger also.

"Yes!" replied Ned without an instant's hesitation, reverting to his usual tone, "I am going to finish it. I am going to tell you the truth—though you haven't told it to me. There is no use in your not facing it, man. Aura doesn't by right belong to you—she belongs to me. If I'd known then—when I was at Cwnfairnog, I mean —what I know now, I—I should have tried to take her

away from all your cursed money-getting even then. It's different now . . . if you make her happy. And if you don't—I—I won't be such a fool again! That's fair and square and above board. So—good-bye!"

As he walked through the streets once more, he felt that this was the last straw. Why had he not made her understand herself? Why had he not carried her off then and there to Avilion? Truly, he was cursed as a fool. He ought to have known, he ought to have guessed, he ought to have understood.

So, as he wandered aimlessly through the city, looking with a lack-lustre eye upon all its hideous sights and sounds, having in his ears the silly giggles of girls as they crowded round the shop windows, having in his eyes an endless procession in those windows, of hats and garments, and flowers and frocks, and fal-lals set there by men as a bait to the only barter which is allowed to womanhood without restraint, he told himself that he would have done right if he had carried her away from contamination to that island in the southern seas, where she would have lived to rear his children and be. . . .

Ye Gods! What should she not have been?

For an instant he caught a glimpse of reality, and then the Dream of Life was his again; but though the Dancer of the World had on all the charms of money and civilisation and culture, her dancing did not hold his eyes.

That evening he went over to the hospital and found Helen, darning away busily at something which she hastily thrust into her work-basket as he came in. Vested interests, of course!

"I am going away, Helen," he said.

"Going away," she echoed. "Why, Ned! you have only just come back. My dear! I do wish you—you would settle down."

"That was exactly what I came to say to you," he replied. "Helen! why won't you marry Ramsay? You you are not likely to find a better fellow, or one whom—you like better. Why not marry him, instead of darning

his underclothes on the sly?" He pointed to the work-basket.

"My duty as a matron," she began, flushing gloriously.

"That will be cold comfort by-and-by," he replied kindly. "Your duty as *mater* would be more satisfying."

Helen held her breath for a moment, then it exhaled in a little childless sigh.

"That is true, Ned," she said quietly, "but when a woman knows what Love is, she cannot give herself without it. And Love comes but once to a woman; at any rate it will only come once to me."

"I wonder," said Ned reflectively, "what womanhood would be like if one were to pound down every one who possessed it in a mortar and fashioned them afresh. Well! I am off—for six months."

"Where?"

"I will say India this time," he replied cheerfully. "Then my letters can be forwarded to Algiers—but——" this he added, seeing her remonstrant face—"I will leave my address with my agents, so you can write through them if anything is wanted—but it won't be wanted. The world gets on as well without me, as I get on without the world."

He went round afterwards to the secretary's office.

"How much capital do you think they would require to run that factory on co-operative lines?" he asked.

Woods shook his head.

"More—more than you ought to afford, Lord Blackborough," he replied evasively; "I can't keep the expenses down as I should wish, even here."

"Have you enough to go on with?"

"Plenty—but——"

"Then work out a scheme, please, for the other and have it ready against my return. And—and stop a bit! There is a place in Wales—I'll write it down—coming in to the market before long. Buy it in, furniture and all. And if the woman who is in charge—Martha's her name—wants to stop on—let her stop. I am off to—to India—for six months."

CHAPTER XXIII

Did Ned Blackborough go to India, seeking dreams at the feet of some entranced immobile ascetic, hidden away even from the sunshine of the world under the shade of the bo-tree? Did he go to Algiers and seek for them in the desert among the pathless dunes, where every step is covered by the eternally-restless, eternally-recurring wind-writing of the sand ripples? Or remaining closer at hand did he, in some remote Cornish village seek to hear the secret of dreams that is told unceasingly in the roar and the hush of the sea? Or on the eternal snows, which dominate all Europe in its hurry and its hunt for gold, which look out with cold eyes on its civilisation, its culture, its crime, did he find what he sought hemmed in by calm glaciers, frozen, ice-bound?

The one would have served his purpose quite as well as another; that being the putting in of time in a manner which did not offend his sensibilities; for, as he told himself often, he was fast becoming a crank.

The world, as it was, did not amuse him very much; it seemed to him hopelessly vulgar, even in its highest ideals for individual success and individual culture.

Wherever he went, and as to that none but himself knew, he returned as usual, punctual to a day. It was early October therefore, when, a little thinner, considerably browner, he found himself walking down Accacia Road West, Blackborough, looking for No. 10, that being the address where he was told the Cruttendens lived.

He was going to see if Aura was happy. Viewed from the outside this appeared unlikely, for Accacia Road was not, so to speak, exhilarating, though it was broad and open enough, with the usual wide asphalt pavement at

either side, and a rather new-looking well-swept road, all too large apparently for the requirements of the sparse-wheeled traffic, in the middle. Possibly the inhabitants of the desirable residences, many of which were still to let, had contemplated being carriage people and had failed of their intention.

As it was, it had a distinctly desolate air. At intervals of some thirty feet upon the pavement stood little pollarded lime-trees, each apparently glued to and supported by yard-wide gratings of cast iron, encircled by the mystic legend "Blackborough Municipal Board." The trees stood on their iron bases firmly, just as the green-shaving ones in the boxes of Dutch toys do on their wooden roundels, and Ned felt impelled by a desire to lift one up and set it down again skew-fashion, just out of the straight line, so as to break the interminable regularity which made him feel as if he must go on and on to the very end. And where that might be only Heaven knew; beyond mortal sight anyhow.

Then, mercifully, the very quaintness of that iron prison-window of a grating, between root and leaf, drew his thoughts away at a tangent, and he became immersed in an imaginary argument between them.

Between the white-feeling fibrelet, down in the darkness of Earth mother's breast, the small sightless seeker supplying the leaves with all things, and clamouring in return for the whisper of blue skies, fresh breezes, singing birds, and the smoke-dimmed foliage which had no tale to tell save of smuts, tradesmen's carts, electric trams, and babies' perambulators.

It was the number on one of the gates, uniform in size, structure, and colour—which occurred, like the gratings, at regular intervals—that made him pause at last, and look curiously at the house beyond it.

Impossible!

It was frankly impossible that Aura, living there, could be happy; although, no doubt, it was what is called by auctioneers a "most superior and desirable family residence." Semi-detached, it had a carriage sweep belong-

ing to both houses, which trended away from a gate with "No. 10, Fernlea" upon it, past one bow-window, one front door, two bow windows, another front door, and a final bow-window to the further gate with its "No. 11, Heatherdale." Which was superfluous; the number or the name?

There was a butcher's trundle, with Hogg upon it in gold letters, standing at one gate, a butcher's trundle with Slogg upon it at the other; and as Ned Blackborough turned in, two butcher boys, each with flat baskets on their blue linen arms, passed out from the little narrow green lattice-work doors, which filled up the space between Fernlea on the one side and Heatherdale on the other, and the high garden walls which separated each couple of superior residences from their neighbouring couples. The boys took no notice of each other, being dignified rivals.

How could Aura be happy, thought Ned, in an environment where the only possibility of differentiating yourself from your neighbour was by employing Slogg instead of Hogg?

The door was opened to him by what is called a superior house-parlourmaid, a young person of lofty manners, frizzed hair, and much starch.

"Wot nyme?" she asked, superciliously.

"Lord Blackborough."

Sudden awe left her hardly any voice for the necessary announcement, and she fled back precipitately to the kitchen. "Cookie!" she exclaimed, sinking into a chair. "Did you ever! Lord Blackborough, 'im as owns half the town an' is as rich as Crees' is—whoever Crees may be!—is in the parlor—such a real gent to look at too. And that ain't all. Missus called 'im 'Ned!' It's for all the world like that lovely tale in the *Penny Cupid* I was reading last night in bed, only he was a h'earl." Her pert eyes grew tender; she sighed.

"Did she now," said Cookie, a lazy-looking, fat lump of a girl, much of the same type. "Poor master! an' he, if you like, is a good-lookin' fellar; but I always did say

she wasn't no lady. She haven't any lace on her underclothes—at least none to speak of."

Meanwhile, after her first glad incredulous cry of "Ned," Aura had hastily thrust away her work and risen.

As she came forward, a world of welcome in her face, in her outstretched hands, Ned Blackborough realised by his swift sense of disappointment how much—despite his own asseverations to the contrary—he had counted on unhappiness.

Truly women were kittle cattle. Truly it was ill prophesying for the feminine sex!

She was happy, radiantly happy. Her face, if thinner, was infinitely more vivid; if less beautiful in a way it was far more alive. It was this which struck him—the vitality of it—its firm grip on life—its almost exuberant power. It seemed to him as if two souls, two minds, two hearts looked out at him from her eyes.

He was no fool. He understood the position in a moment; he knew that love was worsted.

"So you are quite happy," he said, still holding her hand.

"Happy?" she echoed. "Oh, Ned! I have never been so happy in all my life—everything seems so new, everything seems to go on and on for ever, as if there was no end to interest and pleasure."

"I am glad," he said lamely, then added, "I shouldn't have thought——"

She followed his eyes, which had wandered to an electric blue paper covered with gigantic poppies of a deeper hue, with a frieze in which positively Brobdingnagian flowers, presumably of the same species, curled themselves in contortions terribly suggestive of a bad pain in their insides.

"Yes! isn't it awful?" she admitted with a laugh; "but I have taken all the furniture you see out of *this* room and stuffed it away in another empty one for the present"—an odd shy smile showed on her face, and seating herself on a stool once more she took up her work

again and recommenced tucking a piece of muslin with new-born skill; for in the old days she had never touched a needle. "And it isn't quite so bad here at the back where one can't see people. But I wish my poor primroses would grow. I got them in a wood not so very far away, but the cats won't give them a chance—they scratch them up at night, poor things!" Her eyes were sorrowfully on the parallelogram of grass, gravel, and smut-blackened stems below the flight of grimy steps, which was described in the house-agent's list as a charming garden. "If it happens again I shall take them back. It is never fair to keep anything where it can't grow properly."

"Exactly so," he thought; but her face showed absolute unconsciousness.

"What do you find to do with yourself?" he asked suddenly. He felt he would go mad in a week.

"Do!"—she smiled. "Why, I never have half enough time! You see we can't afford to keep experienced servants, as yet. This house is really beyond our income, but my husband—Ted, I mean—was afraid I should not thrive in the town. It is very good of him, isn't it? to go to such expense for me."

"Very," assented Lord Blackborough, recognising Ted's phraseology and feeling bored.

"So I have to do most of the cooking," she went on quite eagerly. "It is rather fun, though Ted is quite awfully particular about his food. But he says I am getting quite a—a *cordon bleue*—that's right, isn't it?"

"Quite right," assented Ned gravely. He was beginning to wonder how he should get away from this atmosphere of satisfaction.

"And then," she went on, and whether she smiled or was grave he could not tell, for her face was bent over her work, "I have so much to think of—you cannot know how much. Sometimes I feel as if, somehow, the whole world was bound up in me."

For the life of him he could not help a thrill in answer to the thrill of her voice. So he sat looking at her

sewing garments for another man's child, until his heart waxed hot, and he said—

"Has it never struck you, Aura, that all this is—just a little rough on me?"

She looked up at him, her beautiful eyes, twin stars of mysterious double life, brimming with swift tears.

"You—you shall be its godfather," she said softly.

He could have cursed, he could have laughed, he could have cried over the pure ridiculousness of the reply; but the pure motherhood in her eyes was too much for him.

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof." The phrase came back to his memory, reproving his individualism, setting aside all other claims as trivial.

"Well!" he said, rising as he spoke, "there is nothing more to be said. So—having found you happy—I must be going."

"Going," she echoed incredulously. "Oh, no! You must stop and see Ted. It is Saturday and he is always home by three. You might stop and come with us to Chorley Hill; we go there every week because I like it. You can see the Welsh mountains quite distinctly if it is clear."

Her eyes were clear anyhow. She was her old self again in her eagerness; the girl free, unfettered in every way, who had tramped those Welsh mountains with him so often. He could see her with the wind blowing amongst her bronze, uncovered curls, billowing amongst the folds of her white linen overall. Why did she wear black now? To save the washing bills he expected. And she spent her life chiefly, no doubt, in buying a herring and a half for three halfpence! She, who had never seen a sixpence! A flood of annoyed pity swept through him at the needlessness of the desecration, rousing his antagonism once more.

"As it is just on three now," he replied, "I'll stop and see him anyhow."

It might be wiser, he felt. It would be a thing got over, which, after the abruptness of their last parting,

was desirable; though, on the whole, he was inclined to have done with it all, to congratulate Ted on his success, and renounce all claim on a woman who had evidently forgotten love in motherhood—and housekeeping.

He felt very bitter; though the question as to whether she could be more content forced itself upon him rudely.

"There he is!" cried Aura joyfully, as in the jerry-built house the grating noise of a latch-key in the front lock became distinctly audible at the back. "I'll run and tell him you are here, and then I can change my dress before we start."

It was on the whole a relief that they two—men who were rivals—should meet without the cause of the rivalry being present also. Though magnanimity was the only card to play. What else was possible when you could distinctly hear the cause of rivalry being kissed in the hall?

Ned Blackborough, therefore, was frankness itself. "How are you, Ted? I won't say I'm glad, but I do find Aura very well, and very happy—so—so that ends it, I suppose."

Ted, who was also looking the picture of health and happiness, flushed up with pleasure, and gripped Lord Blackborough's hand effusively. "Upon my soul, Ned," he cried, "you are just an awfully good sort—one of the best fellows living; and I feel I've been a bit of a beast. Only you don't know how the thought that we should have fallen out over this thing has worried me. It is real good to have you back again. And she is happy, isn't she?—bless her heart! though why she should have kept you in this horrid bare room at the back, I can't think. Come into the drawing-room, old man, it is something like. But it isn't a bad house, is it? Far too expensive, of course, but——"

Afloat on finance, Ted's conscious virtue overflowed like a cold douche on Ned's patience, which had almost succumbed under explanations that, after all, he "was getting along, but that it was safer—especially with expenses ahead—to have a wide margin," when Aura reap-

peared. She was wearing the white coat and skirt, the brown Tam-o'-Shanter in which she had gone to Plas Afon. Ned used often to say that in his last incarnation he must either have been a woman or a man milliner; now he recognised without effort, that not only had Aura knotted the Mechlin scarf about her neck but that she also carried the sables over her arm. So she also remembered.

The fact decided him in an instant. "Let me take those," he said coolly. She looked conscious as she gave up the furs, and remarked hurriedly, "We can walk there, Ted; but we might return by the five-thirty train from Elsham."

"Then I'll wire for the motor to meet me there," replied Ned. "It is only six miles to New Park and there is no object in my going round by Blackborough again; besides there is always a wait at the junction."

It seemed to him an interminable time before they left the lingering outskirts of the town behind them, and even when the last bow-window and gable tailed down into the original four-square cottage, the country about was still grime-clad, smut-bound. But Aura did not appear to notice it. In her eyes sat eternal hope, eternal spring, which finds the old world good.

Even when they sat finally on the sand-set bit of common, interspersed with straggly heath and unkempt gorse which was all the nature that Chorley Hill boasted, she did not seem to see the copious orange peel, the screws of sandwich paper which, to Ned's fastidiousness made the place horrible. Her eyes were on the distances where the Welsh hills showed blue.

"How I would love to see Cwmfaernog again!" she said suddenly, "you know, of course, the poor place had to be sold. Ted very nearly had to pay——'

Lord Blackborough cut short her repetition. "But he didn't," he remarked, "for I bought it."

"You bought it," she echoed incredulously; "Ted never told me that." She glanced to her husband, who, flat on the sand with his hat over his eyes, was apparently asleep in the sunshine. The attitude discovered the fact

that six months of happy married life—and, no doubt, Aura's cooking—had made him perceptibly larger in the waist. He was evidently following Mr. Hirsch's example, thought Ned; though he might, like other folk, have grown leaner upon grief; for Ned, happily, had not lost the faculty of mocking at his own troubles.

"I wonder why he never told me," said Aura, vaguely vexed, making Ned—like the fool that he was, he told himself—instant in excuse.

"He didn't know, I expect; my agent bought it for me. Yes! there it is with Martha and Adam—you know they are married?"

Aura laughed. "Yes! I had a letter from Martha saying she was agreeably disappointed with her lot. That is what I am, too;" she paused. "I should love to go there again. Will you take me some day?"

"Perhaps," he replied soberly, while his pulses bounded.

"May would be the best month for me," she said dreamily. "Besides there are the wild hyacinths—they are like the floor of heaven!"

The floor of heaven! What vague memory was it that woke with those words? A blue sea, a ripple on a boat's side——

Then Ted woke also, clamouring for tea. They had it at a little inn, and were very merry; only after a time the conversation always seemed to drift away towards something to eat, or something to buy. It is always the herring or the penny which had to be paid for it. That was Ted's fault. The sum of his life seemed to be made up of duodecimal fractions.

"We shall have to foot it a bit if we are to catch the train," said Ted gaily as they started; "hold on to me, Aura, it's a bit slippery down the hill."

So with his arm tucked into hers, and Ned on the other side, they made their way talking and laughing. Before long, however, the talk resolved itself into an argument between the two men, Ted defending the action of a certain company, Ned stigmatising it as a swindle.

"The short cut over the water-meadow, Aura," said Ted, interrupting himself. "She is signalled, and it will save time." He drew back as he spoke to let her cross the plank-bridge which spanned the ditch and to clinch his point. "I maintain," he went on, "that the prospectus was as fair as any prospectus can be, for one is bound to put on rose-coloured spectacles in writing one, or the thing won't catch on. Men who have money to invest ought to know——"

"Take care," cried Ned, who was watching Aura; but he was an instant too late. There was a tiny piece of orange peel on the plank—the rest of it lay amongst the water-cresses in the ditch—her foot slipped on it, and she caught at the hand-railing to steady herself, so wrenching herself round by a strong effort to avoid dropping feet foremost into the mud.

It was quite a small affair, but the shock of it left her colourless, half on, half off the plank.

"My dearest!" cried Ted in a fearful fuss, "you aren't——"

"Not a bit," she interrupted gaily, "Give me your hand up, please." But there was a scared, frightened look in her eyes, and five minutes afterwards, as they were hurrying on, she slackened speed.

"We haven't over much time, my dear," said Ted grudgingly.

She looked at him almost with reproach. "I suppose it is falling so, so suddenly," she began.

"Ted," interrupted Lord Blackborough, "I believe I'd better take you wife back in the motor. Sorry I can't take you, but it is only the little De Dion. If you run for it you'll just get it. We shall be home before you will, with that wait at the junction."

"You don't mind, do you, darling?" asked Ted, solicitously.

Five minutes afterwards he waved his handkerchief from the train at them as they made their way leisurely across the water-meadow.

"You will be home in half an hour, and have a good

rest,'' said Ned consolingly, as those beautiful eyes with the eternal hope in them looked into his with that vague dread growing to them.

'' Yes,'' she said cheerfully, '' it was only the start.''

But ten minutes later in the car, she laid her hand suddenly on Ned's as it held the steering gear.

'' Oh, Ned! '' she said, '' I'm—I'm so afraid! '' Her voice was an appeal, and he bent hastily to kiss the hand which clung to his, as it would have clung to any human being.

'' Cheer up! '' he said huskily, '' Nothing's going to go wrong! I'll have you home in no time; so let me steer straight, will you? ''

The little car swept along at top speed. She sat still, her face drawn and pale, her hands holding hard to the white folds of her dress.

Twelve miles at least, allowing for speed limits through the town, and New Park close at hand; just in fact, round the corner. He made the calculation rapidly, and began to sound the hooter.

'' I shall take you in here,'' he said decisively, '' and telephone to Ted. Then when you've had a good rest you can go home.''

The gates, set wide open at his signalling, slipped past in the growing dusk, a rabbit or two showed nimble across the smooth surface of the drive.

'' It will be best, perhaps,'' said Aura, with a catch in her breath.

'' Of course it will be best,'' he replied cheerfully, as he drew up in the wide portico.

'' The housekeeper, please! '' he called, glad for once of the decorous hurry of obedience. '' Take Mrs. Cruttenden, if you please, Mrs. Adgers, and let her rest for a little,'' he said to the dignified lady who appeared as if by magic. Then, only waiting to add in a lower voice, '' and look after her; you understand,'' he was in the car again before it had had time to run down, and was off over a short cut to St. Helena's Hospital, which lay on the hill about three miles off.

Thence he returned in twenty minutes with Sister Ann, leaving Dr. Ramsay to follow more leisurely.

Finally, having sent the car in charge of a *chauffeur* to bring Ted along, he sat in the library and smoked, feeling half derisive at the irony of fate. If he had indeed been Aura's husband, and the father of this coming child, what more could he have done?

Dr. Ramsay arrived cool and collected and went upstairs. Ted arrived in a terrible state of fuss and also went upstairs. Then the house reverted to its usual staid routine. The gong sounded at dressing-time, and, clad in due decorum, Ned dined alone in the huge red dining-room which looked like a big mouth ready to swallow him up. The footman, overlooked by the butler, handed him the courses gravely, the butler filled his glass with '98 Pomeroy. Ned had not asked for it this time, but it was considered the proper thing with sudden and serious illness in the house. And all the while he was thinking how little life and death would affect him, if all these things could be swept away, and he be indeed nothing more than Carlyle's forked radish with a consciousness.

Then he smoked and read again till ten o'clock, when the footman, overlooked by the butler, brought the whisky and water into the library, and Dr. Ramsay came with it.

"I shall want help," he said, "but I don't want to alarm him—her husband. She is as brave as possible, but he—so I thought you——"

"Whom do you want?" asked Ned, going to the telephone.

Dr. Ramsay named a London specialist, and Ned looked up quickly.

"As bad as that?" he asked.

"As bad as it can be, I'm afraid," replied the doctor.

After the specialist had been summoned and duly bribed, there was nothing to do but sit and smoke again, since the memory of those beautiful eyes with the eternal hope of the world's immortality in them, haunted him beyond the cure of sleep. If he had been her husband, could he have done more, could he have felt more?

The London man arrived about one o'clock, and Ned, after the slight bustle of his coming and going upstairs, heard no more noise. The house seemed to settle down into the usual silence of night.

What was going on upstairs? Would she pass into the Unseen? Would she settle the question once and for all?

It was just as the red October sunrise was beginning to glow through the trees of the park, that Ned, standing at the window to watch it, heard the click of the door handle behind him, and turned to see the London doctor, a tall man with eyeglasses and a stoop.

"Well!" he said eagerly. "How is she?"

"As well as can—ah—ah—be expected," said the specialist, who appeared to be afflicted with a stammer, "after such a very serious—ah—ah—operation as—ah—ah—was necessary to save the—the—the interesting patient's life. But—ah—ah—D.V. it is saved, and—and I need hardly say we—we have every reason to be thankful, even though the future is, or may be—of course——"

Here Dr. Ramsay entered the room, and he turned to him. "I was just preparing Mr. Cruttenden for the—ah—possibility——"

"This is Lord Blackborough, sir," interrupted Peter Ramsay impatiently. "I told you I had given Mr. Cruttenden a sleeping draught after the immediate danger to life was over. Mrs. Cruttenden was brought to Lord Blackborough's house just after the accident. Now, sir, if you are in a hurry they are ready to take you to the station."

"Just so—ah!" murmured the great man, a trifle confused. "Very pleased to make your acquaintance, my lord. Thanks, Doctor—ah——"

"Ramsay," said the latter, carrying him off still blandly stuttering.

When Peter Ramsay returned he found Ned looking at the sunrise once more. The whole sky was growing red, the daylight was outpaling the lamp beside which Ned had watched for this dawn.

Suddenly he spoke. "Is it worth while, I wonder, saving life—sometimes? Considering what motherhood means to some women, I doubt it."

And then without another word he turned from the window, and sitting down at the writing-table rested his head on his hand, and stared out vacantly into the room, seeing nothing but those beautiful eyes, twin stars of two souls.

Those eyes that were never to be satisfied! No, it was not worth it.

Then he glanced round at the doctor who stood professionally silent. "I'll give you a piece of advice," he said, "and then we'll drop the subject. If you have anything to say, tell her, not him. You will make it easier for her, I expect, than he will."

CHAPTER XXIV

"WE refuse your terms, your lordship," said the leader of the deputation.

Outside the manager's office where the meeting of delegates was being held, the works of the Biggle factory lay deserted in the autumn sunlight. There was no sign of harvest there for man or beast. The huge engines seemed asleep, the tall factory chimney showed a cenotaph proclaiming a dead life. Here and there among the rows of workmen's houses were knots of men despondently expectant, a shrill woman or two voiced her wrongs aggressively, the children in the gutter looked dirty, unkempt, pale.

Lord Blackborough stared steadily at the speaker. "Then you hold that I am bound to start these works again, despite the fact that they have been running at a loss for some years; and you hold also that I am bound to give you a rise in wages?"

"The men in these works cannot accept a less wage than that received in others which, excuse me, being better managed, pay their owners well—far too well," replied Mr. Green. He was a singularly able-looking man, curiously taut and trim in words, speech, manner, apparently in soul.

"Then I am not only to receive no return on my capital, but I am to spend other capital in paying you, until Germany ceases to make our goods cheaper than we can. Is this fair?" asked Lord Blackborough.

"Quite fair, your lordship," replied the leader; "if only because the capital you own has been wrung unjustly from us—from labour."

"All capital must be, as you call it, 'wrung' from

labour. It does not create itself. I offer you this capital at a very low rate of interest, one and a half per cent. If labour cannot hope to make even so much, over and above livelihood, that seems an end to any enlargement of trade.''

There was a pause; then Lord Blackborough smiled. '' I cannot complain if the figures before you make you hesitate; for to me they are convincing. Let us, therefore, pass over that offer. My next is one to re-open the works, but on a different system. An eight-hours' day, piecework, and no limitations of trades-unions or any other organisation regarding the out-run of any individual.''

A faint stir could be heard amongst some of the older men; but Mr. Green still stood spokesman.

'' That is absolutely out of the question, your lordship,'' he said decisively; '' we are all of us trades-union men. Labour must reserve to itself the right to legislate for the general good of the labourer; if it does not, who will? No one! '' His tone grew bitter. '' We have no right to accept a form of payment which will not give a living wage to——''

'' To the weakest, to the bad workmen, the laziest, the most drunken,'' put in Lord Blackborough. '' Personally, I do not see any reason at all why that class of worker should continue to live. You only have to level down to them. But I am not here to combat your views, only to receive your ultimatum. You refuse? ''

Mr. Green brought his hand down on the table with dramatic force.

'' In the name of Labour we refuse the unjust, iniquitous——''

'' Thank you,'' said Lord Blackborough urbanely, then turned to the secretary. '' Mr. Woods! Have you those documents ready? ''

'' They are here, your lordship.'' Ned Blackborough threw off his gravity, and holding the papers given him in his hand, smiled round the company, which, as if moved thereto by some magic in his manner, rose also.

Mr. Green looked from one to the other. What had this tyrannical employer of labour up his sleeve?

"Men," said the employer of labour frankly, "I am going to pay you with these," he waved the papers, "for listening to me for five minutes. Labour, they say, is dissociating itself from Capital, Capital from Labour. That may be so. I have nothing to do with that. Personally I have money. I have no work. I don't want money and I do want work. That is my position.

"But what I do see here in this England of ours is that labour is dissociating itself from work. It is labouring all day, and bringing forth—as little as it can! It claims the right to do this little. Well! let it if it likes! But why should it deny to any man the right to work at the rate of which he was born physically capable? Why should it make a swift worker take eight hours to do what he can do in four? If I were to put any one of you on oath, you would admit that it is far harder work to dawdle through eight hours than to work through eight hours. I've seen many bricklayers, painters, plasterers lately hard put to it how to eke out the time, and yet preserve an air of occupation, and I have no doubt you have most of you felt this. Now, think what this means. It is labour, *hard labour*! this, the enslavement of free work. Neither body nor mind gain full exercise, muscles and brain decay, the type goes down. But this is the system of the day; we begin it in school, where we let children dawdle eleven years over what they ought to learn in half the time. It greets the boy in his first workshop—it dogs his footsteps everywhere, turning work into labour. Work is—is play! Labour is—is the Devil! What beats me is this. Why, instead of slaving and dawdling, shouldn't the good workman, classed together, of course, be allowed to work, say, four hours, and then go their way? It would give us some chance of breeding a type of Englishman that is now fast dying out, that soon must pass away altogether. Men! don't be fools! Men! don't be slaves.

"That is all I have to say. Now for the payment.

This is a free deed of gift of these works, made out, with a few necessary legal restrictions, in the name of you delegates, to be held in trust for the workers therein, and this is a cheque for the capital necessary to work it for six months. I have already signed both. I was so certain, you see, that your friend and leader, Mr. Green, would reject my other very reasonable proposals that I came prepared. Will you take them, Mr. Green? My solicitor is here, and you can arrange with him: my part is done!"

"Am I to understand——" almost gasped Mr. Green.

Lord Blackborough's face sharpened to the keenest edge of contempt. "Yes! You are to understand, sir, that, tired of being abused up hill and down dale in your organs for behaving like a sensible man, I am behaving like a fool. Well, men! Labour and Capital have for once met and kissed each other. See that they don't fall out again!"

Mr. Green stood with the papers in his hand for a second then he flung them on the table.

"You fling our own money to us as if we were dogs!" he began hotly.

"Dogs!" echoed Ned Blackborough in the same tone. "I would far liefer give it to the dogs than to you—you men who will have the handling of it. It is you who starved those poor children, not I. Their fathers could keep them in comfort for five-and-twenty shillings a week; you made them stand for out six-and-twenty—as if it mattered—as if money, physical comfort, even freedom, counted for anything in a man's search for happiness. That——." He pulled himself up quivering, feeling the uselessness of speech. "Come, Woods!" he said, "it is time I left this Temple of Mammon! Good-day, gentlemen."

"That is a clear waste of a hundred thousand pounds," mourned Mr. Woods as they crossed the courtyard; "you can't get beyond human nature, my lord. Each man will naturally go for that gold, the cleverest of them will get it, and so capital will re-arise out of its

own ashes. You must begin further down—with the children.''

'' Set up a school, eh? Woods, in which they would be taught the truth—that work and play are merely interchangeable terms for occupation. Hullo! What's up? ''

A small crowd of women, mostly carrying babies, but a few of them carrying baskets, stood at the gates blocking the way. Beyond them waited the motor-car, the *chauffeur* standing at the ready to start.

Ned Blackborough walked on until he nearly touched the first woman. She was better dressed than the rest, but who for all that had a coarse, violent face.

'' Do you want anything? '' he asked quietly. '' If you don't, you might let me pass.''

'' Do we want! '' she began in a rhetorical voice. '' Yes! we want the bread you have stole from our children.''

'' Why not give them some of your husband's dinner? '' he replied, pointing to her basket, on the top of which lay several knives and forks. There was a titter, for she was, in truth, carrying refreshment for Mr. Green and his colleagues. She flushed scarlet.

'' My husband! '' she echoed. '' Yes! where is the money you have stole from our husbands? But you'll find that we aren't slaves like the ones you drove in the Indies before you were kicked out! The British workpeople are not to be treated like black niggers or Chinese coolies.''

'' Good God! woman,'' cried Ned, losing patience, '' if you have nothing better to say than to trump up the last scurrilous article in the *Taskmaster*—Here! Woods, follow on—I'm not going to be stopped.''

In an instant they were the centre of a band of excited women, the next they were in the car, and the *chauffeur* was running back to take his seat.

'' I don't want to hurt you,'' called Ned as he turned on power, '' but if some of you don't stand back there will be an accident! ''

"Cowards! Fools! Don't let him go without an answer," shrieked the woman with the basket, who was entangled two deep in the backward rush. The next moment there very nearly *was* an accident, since, failing of all else, the angry orator flung the first thing she could lay her hands upon—the handful of knives and forks—at the car with her full force, and one of the missiles, a three-pronged iron fork, buried itself in the fleshy part of Ned's right hand, as it held the steerer, making him and it swerve.

The fork quivered as he steadied the wheel. Then he turned and raised his hat with his other hand.

"Thank you!" he said, and the word fell on a half-awed, half-alarmed silence.

"She didn't mean to do it," began Woods hurriedly. "Shall I pull it out, my lord?"

"Of course she didn't," replied Ned coolly. "If she had meant to do it, she would have killed a baby. That sort of woman is built that way. Wait a bit, Woods, till we are through the works. I look like a blessed St. Sebastian with it quivering in my flesh!"

"You ought to have that seen to," said little Woods when the surgical operation was over, and they had had to call on the *chauffeur's* handkerchief as well as their own. "It has gone very deep."

"I'll get Ramsay to tie it up properly. We can go back by Egworth," replied Lord Blackborough.

They met Peter Ramsay on the steps, carrying a leathern instrument-bag.

"Come along to my room," he said cheerfully. "I've everything I want in here."

As they opened the door a woman's figure rose hurriedly from an evidently searching inquiry into the contents of a bottom drawer, for under-vests and stockings lay strewn about.

Both Helen Tressilian and Dr. Ramsay blushed scarlet, but Ned's eyes twinkled. "Caught in the act, my dear! Caught in the act!" he said amusedly.

"I thought—I hoped—he had gone out for a long

while on an urgent call,'' retorted Mrs. Tressilian, looking quite viciously at the doctor, who, to hide his vexation, was searching in his bag.

'' I am sorry I disappointed your expectations, Mrs. Tressilian,'' he said stiffly, '' but when I arrived I was not wanted. The man was dead.''

Helen looked as if she had received a blow in the face. Her lip quivered.

'' Undo these rags, will you? '' said Ned to her kindly, wishing in his heart that he could take them and shake them together once and for all. '' I haven't much time to lose.''

She had forgotten her annoyance in sympathy when Dr. Ramsay looked up from his task.

'' I'm afraid I shall have to hurt you a bit. I don't like those very deep holes, possibly from a dirty fork——''

'' It wasn't very clean,'' admitted Ned.

'' Perhaps I had better call Sister Ann——'' began the doctor doubtfully, and Helen flushed up in a second.

'' I have done some work of the kind, Dr. Ramsay,'' she said; '' but if you prefer——''

The challenge was too direct. '' If you do not mind, I shall be glad,'' he replied, bending over a little array of instruments on the table. '' Will you stand here, Lord Blackborough. Hold the hand so, Nurse Helen, and be ready, please, with the carbolised gauze.''

Half-way through Ned winced; and the doctor said sharply, '' That was my fault. Move your hand a little, Nurse Helen; it gets in my way.''

'' There! that's done! '' he continued at last. '' Now for the bandages.''

Was it only fancy, or was Ned Blackborough right in thinking that the supple, skilful hands were not quite so skilful as usual, that there was an unwonted nervousness about them?

He pondered over this as, being hurried, he went downstairs, leaving Helen tidying up, Peter Ramsay sterilising his instruments before putting them away. He left be-

hind him also a sense of stress in the air, a feeling on the part of both those busy people that things could no longer go on as they had been going on. Suddenly Peter Ramsay flung aside a probe, and walked up to Helen decisively.

"Helen!" he said. "I shall have to go away if you won't marry me. Think me as much a fool as you like—the fact remains. You saw—you must have seen how disgracefully I did that simple little thing. Why? Because you were there—because your hand touched mine."

"I will never offer to interfere with your work again!" she said coldly.

"Interfere!" he echoed with a bitter little laugh. "You always interfere! I feel the very touch of your hands upon my clothes."

A slow crimson stained her very forehead. "I am sorry, I will never touch them again."

"That will do no good," he replied gloomily. "Can you not see that your influence touches my life at every point? When I go through the wards I hear you have just passed, I almost see the flutter of your dress. I am always reminded, I am always thinking of you. If you will not marry me, I must go away."

"I cannot marry you, and I have told you why. It is not as though I did not know what love meant. I have known it, and—and I do not know it now. But you need not go away. I will go."

"That, you shall not do," he replied, his chin setting itself long and stern. "Besides it would be no good. This place is redolent of you—your goodness, your sweetness. Oh! Helen, Helen! If you will only marry me, love will come—for you like me—I don't believe there is any one you like better—except perhaps Ned Blackborough."

"Ned!" she echoed, glad of evasion, "poor Ned! I have had such a curious feeling lately that he is in some way maimed; and yet not maimed. I don't know how to express it, but he seems to me to be using his soul more and his body less."

"I wish I could get rid of my body," muttered Dr. Ramsay so quaintly that Helen perforce had to smile; whereat, he said aggrievedly, "It isn't all that either, Mrs. Tressilian; love——"

She checked him with a soft sympathising hand. "Do I not know what love is? Dr. Ramsay! I cannot pity you."

"Then I shall have to go," he said obstinately. "I will not have my work spoiled by any woman."

She felt small somehow; a trifle remorseful perhaps as she left the room. He certainly had been rather dejected of late and it was such a pity.

And Ned also! He was not dejected, but he was changed, curiously changed.

In truth the past six weeks, since the night when he had outwatched the stars, to be met in the dawn by the mischance of a confidence not intended for his ears, had changed him a great deal. He had not seen Aura since. He had purposely left New Park, before she was well enough to receive visitors, and had only returned to it after she had been moved for a freshening up at the sea-side. But he had heard of her constantly from Ted, who, after two or three days of intense anxiety, had gone back to business with renewed zest. This time interruption had apparently been beneficial; at least the first few days of Aura's convalescence and disappointment had been cheered by him with the most sanguine of outlooks on the future. He even went so far as to say that, perhaps after all, things were best as they were. They would move into a still better house, and be able to set up properly before taking upon themselves the responsibilities of life.

Aura had said "Perhaps," and after he had gone had lain and cried softly to herself. There is nothing in the wide world so sacred to a woman as her grief for the child which has died to save her life. It is grief of the most inward type, unknown, unrecognised by others, which lasts through the years and grows no slighter than it was when in the dim, between life and death, she first learns that her child has paid the ransom for her.

In a way, therefore, the doubt, which by degrees grew into a certainty, that Fate had denied motherhood to her, had at first almost brought her comfort.

If there was no probability of her being more fortunate in the future, happiness neither awaited her, nor could there be any rivalry between the dead child and a living one. There was a tragedy in both lives, not only in the one.

Such thoughts as these, aided by the very intensity of her grief, kept her going until she began to face the world again at the sea-side. Then came one of those fiery furnaces of the soul through which so few pass unscathed. She used to wander down at the ebb low tide, past the groups of children building castles in the sand, past the uttermost outermost little waving fringe of sea-spoil left, but for a brief half hour, by the regretful retreat of the waves, and gaze out over the long, low sand-banks, claimed as their own by clouds of fluttering, settling, fluttering seagulls.

The tide had truly ebbed—the mud-flats of life lay bare. Her thoughts were like the gulls, never still for a second. Only in the slack tide of the estuary there was rest for a moment, and the long, brown arms of the seaweed waved sleepily, seeming to call her to rest with them.

So she would go back again to her lodgings, but in the night time she would rise and draw up her blind and look out.

And lo! the tide was up again, the sea lay like a sheet of silver and there was no more land, neither was there any sound of tears.

Thus, after a time, she came back to the new house on which Ted, during her absence, had been lavishing enough money, he felt, to prove his undying affection twice over. He was quite full of its many advantages when she finally arrived there. For one thing, they would be able to entertain in it; and entertainments would be a great feature in his coming life. One of the chief reasons for Mr. Hirsch's enormous success had been

his genius for giving *recherché* dinners. Ted could not hope to rival him; still with the *cordon bleue's* help—here he became exceedingly affectionate—much was possible. They must certainly entertain Mr. Hirsch and his daughter. Oh yes! had not Aura heard of the daughter? Mr. Hirsch had imported her ready-made, grown-up—really a very nice-looking girl—from Berlin? She was about twenty, and no one had had any idea Hirsch was a widower; but he seemed devoted to the girl, and to have given up the search for a wife which had been his pursuit for years.

The fact of the matter being, though Ted did not know it, that, having failed once more in his endeavours to marry a well-connected Englishwoman, Mr. Hirsch had fallen back on a less legal establishment of his youth for which he had always paid with scrupulous honour. Hence Miss Hirsch who, being a goodnatured creature like her father, bid fair to fill up his affections and give him the home for which, as he grew older, he was beginning to yearn.

Anyhow Mr. and Miss Hirsch would have to be entertained when they came to Blackborough, and Aura should have the long talked-of pink satin gown in which to receive them. It might even be possible to put them up. There were two good rooms on the first floor which would not be wanted yet awhile. Aura might see them after she had had her tea.

"Thanks, Ted," she replied hurriedly, "but—but perhaps I've done enough for to-day. I can see them to-morrow."

Just those few minutes of facing the new house, the new life had wearied her absolutely. And she had other things to face in the near future. Sooner or later she felt that she ought to tell her husband that those rooms would never in all human probability be wanted.

But she could not tell him now. That was beyond her strength.

CHAPTER XXV

"MRS. EDWARD CRUTTENDEN requests the pleasure of Lord Blackborough's company at dinner."

It was a printed card, and Ned Blackborough laid it down on the table, feeling that the world was getting beyond him.

This was about a week or so after Aura's return, and he had intended to call on her that very afternoon. Now he refrained.

"I am so sorry we had to give you such short notice," said Ted, whom he met in the street next day, "but the Hirschs were coming down unexpectedly and it had to be hurried. I hope you can come."

"Oh! I am coming all right," said Ned a trifle surlily. "I hope it won't be too much for Aura."

Ted looked at him with immense surprise. "My dear fellow! Aura is as well as she can be, and awfully interested in it. Well! I'm glad you can come. You'll like Miss Hirsch, she's charming, so fresh and gay."

It was a real parlourmaid who announced Lord Blackborough this time, and he saw a furtive green-grocer in the background; otherwise the house seemed to him much the same, only larger, more pretentious. The drawing-room was distinctly more—what was the word? chaste. Yes! distinctly more chaste. It was white and gold, and was that Aura in a pink satin dress—ye heavens above! in pink satin! She did not look ill, but as their eyes met he was conscious of a distinct shock. There was something wanting in them, the best part of her was not there.

Where was it?

The question absorbed him even while he was being presented to Miss Hirsch, a jolly, handsome, rather stout

girl, also—as the fates would have it—in pink satin. But she was literally ablaze with diamonds.

"Aha! my old friend Blackborough!" laughed Mr. Hirsch explosively, "this is good sight for sore eyes. Make me your compliments for my daughter, sir."

"I prefer to make them to Miss Hirsch herself," replied Ned gallantly, and then they went in to dinner.

It was an excellent repast. Ted had evidently pursued the only course consonant with success. He had ordered it direct from Benoist's and kept the minions of the great caterer out of evidence. Iced mellon gave place to *consommé biscuit, truite à l'aurore* to *filets financieres, poularde casserole* to something else, until at the end the conversation became interspersed with cigarettes and coffee.

It was an enormous success; and all the time Ned Blackborough was wondering what had become of Aura, whither she had gone. Only once did he get a glimpse of what he had known in the past, and that was when, after Miss Hirsch had sung like a second-class professional (in other words like her mother) to his accompaniment, he had asked Aura if he might not accompany her also.

"My dear Blackborough," Ted had exclaimed, "after such singing as Miss Hirsch has just given us, I'm sure my wife would hardly like——"

"But *I* should like," he had interrupted imperturbably.

Then it was that Aura had said swiftly in an undertone—

"Please don't."

He had obeyed, as he had obeyed the same order once before. But that night he sat up again and drank whisky and water and smoked opium-sodden cigarettes, and the next day he went down to call, for he did not intend that sort of thing should go on.

She did not intend it should either. He found her in the back garden, which was really quite of a decent size, busy planting something between the prim privets, and

eunonyms and variegated hollies which, even in this late autumn, gave the wall-surrounding shrubbery a semblance of green.

"Do you know what I am planting?" she asked frankly. "I am planting some *iris alata.*"

He narrowed his eyes and looked at her.

"Hardly in the most beautiful place in the world," he said cynically.

"That won't make them any the less beautiful," she replied and then suddenly her whole face melted, her eyes shone with tears, with smiles, with happiness, regrets, with fair passions and bountiful pities and love without stain. "Oh, Ned! Ned!" she cried, holding out her hand to him again. "I have to beg your pardon for so much—I have to thank you for so much—which shall I do first?"

What could he do save take her hand as frankly as it was given and say "Neither." Since between them he knew there was no possibility of gratitude, no possibility of forgiveness.

So they began to talk, not of her illness or of these later days at all, but of Cwmfaernog, and Plas Afon, and how she had found the snake-stone under the old yew-tree.

"I always wear it, you know, at least I do nowadays," she said, and drawing up her loose sleeve showed it to him worn as an amulet, warm against the fair whiteness of her skin. His heart gave a throb. For all her courage then, she was not happy. Such trifles tell of a search for support.

Then Ted came in, breezy and full of life. It had been a success last night, had it not? The pink satin had not suited Aura quite so well as he had hoped; not so well as it had suited Miss Hirsch, who had looked ripping. Perhaps it ought to have been blue. Or perhaps it was the diamonds that did the trick. Had any one ever seen better diamonds than Miss Hirsch's?

Anyhow, it had been a great success, and they must give some more dinner-parties and get into the way of entertaining.

Aura might ask Mrs. Tressilian and Dr. Ramsay as a beginning.

"You won't get Ramsay," remarked Ned Blackborough; "he is away in Vienna. He has taken three months' leave, but he put in a very good man for the time."

In truth, St. Helena's Hospital was, as Peter Ramsay had declared it would, getting on quite as well without him as it did with him. The only person who was dissatisfied with the new state of affairs was Helen Tressilian, and she was frankly in a very bad temper both with him and with herself. It was so foolish of him. Had she not known it would be absolutely useless she would have sent in her own resignation, but what good would it have done? It would only have made matters worse, since he would never return if she went. All she could do was to hope very sincerely that the three months' change would effect its object, and that he would forget her.

And yet even this did not quite soothe her irritation, even this was not quite what she wanted.

What did she want? She was taking herself severely to task one afternoon when Sister Ann came in looking grave.

"I have just had a letter with some rather bad news in it," she said. "I hope it isn't true, but it sounds serious. It is from my friend who I told you had gone to study at Vienna."

Helen's heart leapt to her mouth. "Well?" she said impatiently, wondering the while with a sudden feeling of dread why she should feel so disturbed.

"I'll read you what he says. 'We are all a bit downhearted just now because Ramsay, who is one of the nicest fellows who ever lived, is ill with pyæmia. It would be a thousand pities if he were to go out, for he is quite the best operator here. Of course he is being well looked after, but it must be awful away from all one's friends.'"

Helen went deadly white. "Do you think it is true?" she asked almost helplessly.

Sister Ann re-folded the letter methodically. "It must be *true,* of course, and it is not unlikely. You know he was always a trifle reckless when there was anything to be done even here. One can only hope he is not so very bad. You will send a wire, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Helen. "Of course we will send a wire—and—yes. I will send a wire, I think."

"It is terribly sad," said Sister Ann, for all her invariable cheerfulness, quite mournfully. "Apart from his immense value to the world, he was such a dear soul in so many ways. I have often thought what an excellent husband and father he would have made."

After she had gone, to tell the news presumably in that even tone of voice, Helen thought with a rush of resentment, the latter sat in a perfect tumult of emotion. Anger, pity, regret all fought for first place. What right, for instance, had Sister Ann to use the past tense in speaking of Dr. Ramsay? He was not dead.

Dead?

Impossible, incredible! It could not, it must not be true!

But what good would a wire be to a man lying perhaps unconscious, at any rate alone?

She stood up pushing her hair back from her forehead. A great wave of pity for him, but more for herself, overcame her; she stared out of the room scarcely seeing what was before her.

Just on the opposite side of the room a long pier glass filled up the space between the two tall windows. It was growing dusk, and the mirror showed dark and empty looking against the light. No, not quite empty, there was a figure in it going away from her into the darkness. It was the figure of a man making haste. It hurried on, its back towards her, down an interminable pathway that was lost in the shadows. It was going, oh, so fast! And she recognized it. It was Peter Ramsay as she had last seen him hurrying away to catch his train. It grew smaller and smaller, it overtook the shadows, they gathered it in.

"No! no!" she cried aloud. "Don't go—don't go!"

Was there a pause? She could not tell. The vision vanished, and she was left to the knowledge that she had once more almost over-stepped the bounds of the unseen, and to a dim sense of something unsuspected in herself.

One thing was certain. He must not go, thinking she cared not at all. How many hours was it to Vienna? That mattered very little if she started as quickly as she could. She must get there sooner or later.

Half an hour afterwards she was at the station, and by midnight she was standing looking out at the stars from the deck of a Channel steamer with the lights of Calais ahead of her. She did not regret her impulse, all she thought of was that somehow that figure she had seen losing itself in the shadows must be stopped, must be brought back to the light.

It was a wearisome journey. She had left without due preparation, she was all unused to foreign travelling, and she did not care to forage for food for fear she might be left behind.

So it was rather a dejected Helen Tressilian who got out in the struggling daylight of a November day at the Haupt Bahnhof, and, after a while, found herself driving, she literally knew not whither, through wide streets and narrow streets to the public hospital. It was there, she knew, that Peter Ramsay was working, so there she hoped to have news of him at once. But she had reckoned without the formalism of German institutions. At first she could hardly elicit the fact that there was such a person as a Scotch physician by name Ramsay in Vienna, for she had called him English, and that error, a grave one to the foreigner, had seemed to discredit her altogether.

Then who was she? Sister or mother? If not, what claim had she to be admitted to the bedside of the "dangerously-sick un-friend-recognising patient?" She had better see the Chief-Head-Over-Superintendent, and if he consented, perhaps!

So she drove off again disheartened. The Chief-Head-

Over-Superintendent was out, and after waiting for him till she grew sick and cold she determined to follow him to the Medical College. Here she was met by more formalities, to which was added a suggestion that, not being a relation, she should go to the British consulate and get a certificate that she was of the "due-respectable-and-to-be-admitted-friends."

And then, suddenly, to her despair at the delay, came the memory of Pagenheim. It was silly of her not to have thought of him before. Yes. She would go to Pagenheim; he was her only hope.

She was shown into a room stuffed full of furniture, where a florid, bearded man had evidently just been smoking.

He sat looking with immense interest at the card she had sent in.

"Mein Gott!" he said, going on in fairly idiomatic English. "But your names! T r e s - s i l——"

"Tressilian," said Helen impatiently.

"Tres-silian! Now, Miss, what does that mean? Tre—three—sil-i-an. Does it mean three fools? Wass fur ein—Gott in Himmel! you are crying—Gnädige Fraulein, pardon."

It was the truth. Helen, worn out by her long and hungry journey, disappointed, driven from pillar to post, had found it too much that her last hope should waste precious time in philological studies.

"I beg your pardon," she said, stifling her tears, "but I have come all the way from England to see Dr. Ramsay, and now I cannot get at him. Do help me if you can."

Dr. Pagenheim blew out his cheeks as if a pipe might have been a consolation to him. "Soh! You—you cannot be his mother—you—you are his sister, doubtless?"

Helen, behind her handkerchief, shook her head. "I—I am a nurse," she said faintly, "and I have come on purpose——"

"But, gnädige Fraulein," interposed the great man, becoming professional, "he is already nursed, nursed

devotedly. There is no place for you I fear. It is against the rules. If you were a relation it were different."

Helen looked up at him, goaded to desperation.

"But—but I am more than that, Dr. Pagenheim," she said. "I—I am engaged to be married to him."

The blond, florid face melted into instant sentiment, the tongue into German.

"Soh! Oh Love! Love! What dost thou not? So he is betrothed and we knew it not? Stay! is your name Helen?"

"Yes. Helen Tressilian," she replied.

"*Liebes Kind!*" cried the great professsor. "He has in his delirium called for you by name. Dry your tears, we will mend him for you surely. Helen! Ach! that is an all-powerful, love-compelling name-of-uttermost victory, so have no fear. You shall to him go so soon as I can get on my boots." He stuck out a big slippered foot in explanation and encouragement as he beamed on her.

"If I might have a glass of milk," Helen felt emboldened to say. "I haven't had time, somehow——"

"Gott in Himmel! She is hungry," roared the professor. "Oh, Love! Love! what dost thou not? Greta," this to the elderly servant who answered his furious ringing. "Milk, food, drink, everything for this gracious-betrothed-one while I put on my boots."

Fortified by hot coffee and a roll, Helen, being whirled through the streets of Vienna in the doctor's *coupé,* felt that, come what might, she did not repent her hasty impulse. Even if Peter Ramsay lived.

"Thou must remember, *liebes kind,*" came the professor's jovial voice all softened to warning, "he is very ill; only the good God knows how ill. But we are doing our best for him. The high fever has gone, but the weakness remains. You must be very quiet."

"I am a nurse," she said, "I know." In a way it was only as a nurse that she had come, only because she could not bear to think of him dying alone.

It seemed an interminable age that she sat in the *coupé*

while Dr. Pagenheim was preparing the hospital authorities. It was quite a small place, almost private: a place reserved by the doctors for their most serious cases. It had a conventional air, and Helen as she sat could see a sister of charity or two, with large white-winged caps, moving about. Would they let her in? Surely Dr. Pagenheim was powerful enough for that. He came back after a time with the matron, a severe looking sister, with a weary face. He was much graver. "You can see him, and, if you are quiet, you can remain; but he will not know you."

Did he not? As she entered the wide, white ward, empty save for the bed set in the middle, the low, hurried muttering from the figure which lay on it ceased for a moment. It almost seemed as if the mutterer was listening. Then he began again, too low to be intelligible even to the English ears which bent over to listen. The nurses, two fair, simple-faced sisters, looked at her with kindly compassion and curiosity.

"He is so restless," said one, speaking in the low, even sing-song which so many nurses acquire as a kind of whisper. "If he could only sleep; but we dare not give drugs, his heart is so weak."

His right hand, all bandaged up to the elbow, lay slung in a shifting cradle just above the bed-clothes, his left, the fingers closing and unclosing with a terrible regularity, hung half over the bedside. She slipped hers into it and it closed on hers tightly, so tightly that after a time the blood seemed to seek a way through her finger-tips. The muttering became more distinct.

"Number 36. I am not sure about number 36."

"He is doing very well," she replied softly. "Sister Ann is quite pleased with him. The dressings were not in the least disturbed, and he slept all night without drugs. He is to have beef-tea to-day," the muttering had ceased, the sick man lay quite still, the grip of his hand was slackening, "and to-morrow he will have chicken, and then, if he will only sleep, sleep, sleep quite quietly, sleep—sleep—sleep."

"Gnädige Fraulein," came the nurse's whisper, "seat yourself so, there must be no movement if possible."

How long she sat there, her hand in his, she did not know, long enough anyhow to feel that, when, or how, or why she knew not, the very touch of him had become dear to her, for it was not only the tingling of the veins after the almost benumbing pressure of his fingers which sent the thrill to her heart and her brain. He had told her the truth: the past was in the present.

After a time he stirred, swallowed a spoonful of nourishment, and slept again. Another nurse stole into the room and whispered with the two in a corner. Helen could not see their calm, fair, untroubled faces, but she could hear one word, a word they had renounced for themselves, which for all that sent a thrill through their woman hearts.

"Love—true love!"

Was it that? Or had she merely wrecked herself and him for something evanescent, worth little? Helen was half asleep herself, all she realised was that something had brought rest to him for the time.

So when the bad turn came again he was stronger, but so long as she was in the room the painful restlessness never returned. And day by day the dressers were more satisfied.

"Helen of Troy is sufficient to bring any man back from the grave, *lich du liebe Gott*, what will not the true love do?" beamed Herr Pagenheim, and the nurses sighed and smiled. Finally, there came a day when Peter Ramsay really opened his eyes, found Helen beside him, and closed them again contentedly. After this came cogitation, so by degrees a puzzled look grew to his eyes.

"It was awfully good of you to come and help nurse me," he said weakly at last. "How did you find out I was ill?"

"Sister Ann had a letter, so I came. I knew you must be alone," she replied sedately.

"It must have been an awful journey for you. I feel so sorry about it," he continued almost impatiently.

"You must have had a lot of trouble. And then, when you got here—what beats me is, why did they let you in? They are so strict."

She felt the colour rising to her face. "Oh! I managed," she said evasively. "Now, you really must take your Valentine's extract and go to sleep."

He shifted restlessly. "How can I go to sleep when I am worried?" he said pitifully, fretfully as a child. "I tell you it must have given you a lot of trouble, and I'm so vexed."

Her face grew tender as she bent over him. "I assure you I had no trouble at all. It was quite easy. Will you —will you promise me to go to sleep if I tell you how—how I managed?"

"Do," he said with a little sigh. "I really want to know."

"They asked me if I were your mother or your sister," she said, scarcely able to speak for her trembling lips. "So I said no—but—but that I was engaged to be married to you."

He lay quite still. He did not even put out his hand to hers, but the swift tears ran down his hollow cheeks and wetted the pillow.

"You promised you would go to sleep, dear," she said softly, and he closed his eyes, once more like a child.

CHAPTER XXVI

"If Madam will leave it to us," said Myfanwy Jones, "we will give her satisfaction."

She took in all Aura's grace and beauty as she spoke. Full of shrewd sense, appreciative by virtue of her race, of all that makes for beauty, knowledgeable in all that enhances beauty, her bold dark eyes realised that here was some one worth dressing.

"We will—yes! we will make it of white *velours-panne* and dead white velvet. It will become Madam, I am sure. I will consult the buyer regarding the price."

She swept away over the Turkey carpets of Williams and Edwards' shop, her shiny, undulating black satin train rippling behind her, towards a tall, most immaculate figure in a long frock coat, who was busy comparing scraps of silk with another tall, broad-shouldered young man. Both might have entered a grenadier company and looked all too big and strong for their task.

"Excuse me, Mr. Morris," said Myfanwy, with the most superb courtesy, "but I should like to speak to Mr. Pugh for an instant." Having got him to herself, her manner changed.

"Merve!" she said sharply. "What price order costume, *panne* and velvet, my wedding-dress design—you know. I want to make it."

"For that lady?" he said, looking across to where Aura stood, feeling as she still felt in shops, utterly shy and miserable. In an instant a hot flush overspread his face, and he turned back to the silk patterns.

"Thirty guineas."

Myfanwy sniffed scornfully. "You will oblige me, Mervyn Pugh, by having some sense. Look at her! will

she give more than fifteen guineas for a dress? Never! and I want to make it."

"Five-and-twenty," he said, refraining from the look. He would gladly have stuck to the thirty, and so have driven Aura from the shop, had he dared. But he did not dare. He was under Myfanwy's orders, and, so far, he had had no reason to regret the fact. He had climbed like Jonah's gourd, and was now Williams and Edwards' first buyer. And next year when, after his marriage with Myfanwy (who was now head of the costume department) the additional interest of making money for himself instead of for others had come in his life, and there could be no doubt of their success. He had all the Cymric's fine feelings for feminine fal-lals (which is shown indubitably by the names over the drapers' shops in London) and Myfanwy had a perfect genius for dress. Considering, therefore, the crowds of women absolutely without any taste at all who desire to dress well, the result was assured. He began to wonder how he had ever thought seriously of being a pedagogue, a demagogue, or a minister.

"I shall say twenty," remarked Myfanwy reflectively, "it can be made for fifteen, and she shall have it for that in the end. But I want to make it. She is lovely—and I want to know how I shall look in my wedding-dress."

"Twenty!" said Mervyn wavering.

"I hope it may buy her all she desires as my dress will buy me," contended Myfanwy, with a challenge of lip and eyes. "I will say eighteen, Mervyn, to begin with."

With that she swept back to Aura. "It will be eighteen guineas, Madam," she said sweetly; "but if Madam will give us the Mechlin scarf she is wearing to utilise, it will be fifteen."

Fifteen! It seemed enormous to Aura's ignorance. Yet Ted had given twelve, she knew, for the pink satin, and he had bidden her—since he was too busy to shop—be sure and get something very nice indeed for Ned Blackborough's dance on New Year's Eve. Fifteen

whole sovereign remedies and fifteen shillings over! What an immense amount to spend upon herself, she who at best was but a poor maimed thing. Every now and again this feeling of being, as it were, a castaway, a derelict on Life's sea, would come to her, though she knew that millions of women, many from choice, went through the world and left their mark on it with never a child to call them mother. Still the sense of being, as it were, out of the fighting-line was at times oppressive. So few things seemed to matter; certainly not the spending of money.

"It will have to be ready by the 31st," she stipulated, and then she smiled as she invariably did when she remembered Ned Blackborough.

Myfanwy Jones took in the smile with critical shrewdness. Had she been asked, she would have said it was not exactly the smile of a married woman, although Aura had given her name as Mrs. Cruttenden.

What of that? Myfanwy's notions were decidedly broad, and if she could compass a good time, as she herself counted a good time, for this lovely girl, the lovely girl should have one.

"Miss Moore! Madam's measure!" she called in queenly fashion, and searched in her beaded-satchel—pockets would have disturbed the elegant set of her dress—for a pencil. It had slipped inside a folded paper, and as Myfanwy removed it, she smiled in her turn. For she had caught a glimpse of the writing and printing inside the paper.

"Miss Alicia Edwards," "Messrs. Williams and Edward," "per M. Jones."

Only that morning Myfanwy had paid the bill and received her commission on the sales; so there it was awaiting developments.

"If Madam will come for one fitting," suggested Myfanwy superbly. She was going to stake her reputation on this dress, and she meant not to lose it.

The result exceeded even her expectations.

Aura looked at herself in the long glass and then at

Myfanwy, who, with infinite condescension, had insisted on seeing Madam dressed.

"What have you done to me?" she asked, "I don't know myself."

Was it the long, straight, brilliant, moonshiny folds that made her look so tall and slim? Was it the tiny, scarcely-seen silver threads outlining the flowing curves of dead-white velvet about the hem which made one think of moonlit clouds? Was it the cunningly devised drapery of lace which made the bodice seem a loose sheath to loveliness?

Myfanwy Jones looked at Aura with undisguised pity. "It is only that Madam is so seldom dressed; she is only clothed; but to-night she will be the best-dressed person in the rooms." She looked at her doll with a sphynx-like expression not without some malice in it. "If Madam will allow me," she said, and her deft fingers were in the bronze hair: "so—the shape of Madam's head is heavenly—and—and not the diamond brooch—the dress requires nothing but Madam's self. That is right! I trust Madam will enjoy herself."

Aura went downstairs to show herself to her husband, with a queer new feeling of power tingling in every vein. Why at two-and-twenty should she hold herself derelict? A ship need not always steer straight to the pole.

Ted had been extremely busy and rather irritable ever since she had returned; not irritable with her—he never was that—but *distrait* and careless. In a way it had been a relief, since it had given her time to try and adjust herself to her new outlook. She had not even spoken to him regarding that new outlook; she was almost doubting if she should. Her silence would, no doubt, be a bar to perfect confidence; but was such a thing as perfect confidence possible between two people so dissimilar as she and Ted? Perhaps it was better to drift on. Whither?

The question would come with a pang, sometimes bringing the thought that it might have been better if she and the little one—the little daughter they told her—had

gone out hand in hand to wander in the "groves of asphodel." That was Ned's phrase; and with that would come another pang.

What would she do without Ned? He had been so kind. He had lent her books to read, he had taken her out in the motor, he had even talked of the dead baby almost as if he understood how dear a memory it had to be.

Ted looked at her from head to foot, and a slow smile crept over his good-looking sensible face.

"That is something like," he said. "By Jove! you look most awfully fetching! A little ice-bergy," he continued, bending to kiss the white shoulder above the Mechlin lace: "but—but that's your style. Only I wish you had more colour. If this 'biz' of mine comes off, we'll take a holiday somewhere—Monte Carlo, perhaps—the Hirsches are going there. Now we ought to be starting. You don't mind my dancing, do you dearest? I do wish you'd learn. It looks so odd your sitting out with the old fogies."

"I shall sit out with Ned," she replied lightly.

For the first time in her life Ted frowned at her. "It seems to me," he said quite nastily, "that you have done a lot of sitting-out with Ned lately. I don't half like it."

She stared at him, and all the way to New Park sat thinking of what he had said. Was it possible he was going to be jealous of her? Of her who had married him to get rid of the very possibility."

A ray of light from a gas-lamp lit up her face, and she found Ted's eyes fastened on her.

"You are most awfully fetching to-night—you look so jolly mysterious somehow," he said joyously, putting his cheek against hers. "Give me a kiss, wifelet."

She gave him one. She would have given him a dozen of the trivial things had he asked for them! Then she laid her hand on his.

"You weren't serious about Ned, were you?" she asked.

"Not—not altogether," he admitted with a smile; "but you can't be too careful, my child. People are the devil to talk. And you mustn't forget that he *did* want to marry you."

She must not forget! And all her efforts had been to forget it utterly. What a queer world it was!

"Here we are," said Ted cheerfully. "By Jove! Blackborough is doing it well!"

For once, indeed, New Park looked habitable. Ned, remembering the East, had had it illuminated in Indian fashion, and even the heavy-browed architraves and the stucco columns looked passable outlined by rows of little lamps. Great cressets blazed following the ground plan of the huge pile, the balustrades of the formal terraces shone in lines of light. The wide portico, carefully enclosed, was full of palms, and festooned with vines from which hung great clusters of grapes. Within, it was impossible to recognise the formal suites of rooms. They seemed to have vanished, taking with them all the stiff furniture, the gorgeous clogging carpets. In their places were airy pavilions, orange gardens, great groves of tall lilies. Money had been spent lavishly in getting rid of all traces of money. And in the centre of it all stood Ned Blackborough with Helen Tressilian, looking years younger, beside him, as she received congratulations on her approaching marriage, all the time keeping a watchful eye lest Peter Ramsay should weary after his recent illness; but he looked alert and keen as ever.

"A small and early, and you come at a quarter past nine!" said Ned, then paused, absolutely dazzled by the shiny folds, the moonlit clouds, the parted sheath of the bodice concealing surely the most beautiful thing in the world. His vagrant mind reverted on the instant with a quaint admixture of regret and exultation to the adornment he had ordered for the select supper-table at which Aura was to be entertained. This woman was beyond such simplicities as a little purple iris. For her, white roses, tuberoses, gardenias, stephanotis; all the deadly

sweet white things in the world, even the poisonous *dhatura!*

"I have put my name down for some dances later on," he said, handing her a programme; "I shall be busy at first, but—let me see—Lord Scudamore, I am going to give you the honour of being presented to Mrs. Cruttenden. Remember, you are engaged to me for supper."

"Is that wise? What will *they* say?" asked Helen doubtfully, as Aura and her cavalier—a diplomatic-looking wearer of an immaculate dress-suit, with some sort of a ribbon across the shirt—moved off.

"*They,* my dear Helen, will by that time be envying me my good luck, at least all the men will, and I will tell the cavilling women she is a bride. Did you ever see such a fairly bewildering dress? She is the whole Dream of Fair Women rolled into one."

"Let us go into the Winter Palace. Have you seen it?" said Aura's diplomat, and she went with him nothing loth. Ten minutes afterwards, however, she complained of a draught, and left it somewhat hurriedly, she with fine flaming cheeks and he somewhat sulkily. That was the worse of rustics; they could not understand the most ordinary *persiflage.*

"Where would you like to sit? I am afraid I am engaged for this dance," he said icily.

"Oh! anywhere, I like to be alone," replied Aura.

It was not long her fate. Mr. Hirsch spied her out and bore down upon her, white waiscoat and all. His open admiration was almost a relief, mixed up as it was with still more boundless adoration of his daughter, who came flitting past in Ted's arms. They were too much absorbed in their waltz and their enjoyment of it to notice the sitters out, but Mr. Hirsch waxed enthusiastic over their appearance. They were a couple to be proud of, and he really *was* becoming quite proud of Ted, who promised to be a very rich man. He felt quite like a father towards him; he had indeed fathered him into the world of speculation, and—ha-ha-ha—then he waxed exceedingly hilarious—if Mr. Cruttenden hadn't been in

such a terrible hurry to get married, who knows but what a family arrangement—she must excuse him, but really if she would look so superlatively beautiful she must expect the world to go crazy.

"What are you laughing at so loudly, papa?" asked Miss Hirsch, pulled up in the next round by her parent's laughter. "I'm sure he must be boring you terribly, Mrs. Cruttenden. And there is Mr. Leveson, papa, just dying to be introduced—he told me so just now—do go and fetch him. You'll find him awfully amusing, Mrs. Cruttenden, he has seen so much life."

He had seen too much for Aura. She came out from the conservatory white with anger. By this time half the men in the room were looking at her, and it was no longer any question of being alone. She was beginning to feel frightened, she looked vainly for Ted, but he having seen her, as he phrased it self-complacently, "well-started," was amusing himself. So, in the crush of smiling, flattering faces, she saw Ned Blackborough's, and caught almost convulsively at his arm, and his quiet decorous claim.

"Our dance, I think."

"Oh! Ned!" she said hurriedly, "do let us go to some quiet place where we can get away from everybody."

The suggestion was but too welcome. Free for a time from his duties as host, he cast all prudence to the winds. The sort of thing that had been going on was all very well, but it must end in the inevitable way. When she was happy, he might have been a fool. Now, he would not be one. It was not as if he would be doing Ted any real harm. If he was free of her he would be free to marry and have sons to inherit his money, he could even marry Miss Hirsch!

The library whither they escaped looked snug and comfortable, all untouched by the babel without. The reading lamp by the blazing fire; Ned's book as he had left it.

"This is nice," she said with a little shiver of satisfac-

tion, and taking up the book crouched down in her usual fashion by the fire to see what it was.

Ned's pulses were bounding. It was all he could do to keep his voice steady.

"You oughtn't to do Cinderella in that lovely gown!" he said.

Aura looked at him critically. "I feel like Cinderella," she said. "I believe I want to go home before twelve; and I don't think I like the gown; it makes me something I never was before."

There was a silence. Ned Blackborough was telling himself he was a fool.

"I shall put out the light if you insist on trying to read a bad French novel instead of speaking to me," he said. "There!—" the click of the electric button sounded clear. "It's much nicer with the firelight. Give that thing to me."

"Bad French novel," she echoed. "Why do you read it if it is bad? I wouldn't."

"All people are not perfect," he said recklessly. "Most of us—except you—have a bad side. I often wonder what you would say if I were to show you mine?"

"You couldn't," she said softly.

He had literally to harden his heart before he could go on, and then he had to double back. "It—it isn't a bad book after all," he went on turning the leaves idly, "it is only real life. I'll tell you the story if you like. Of course it is about a woman, and a man, and—and a husband—the old story that is always cropping up in the world, so the book's no good." He threw it aside in sudden impulse upon the table, and knelt down beside her. "Aura," he said passionately, "you and I know the beginning of the story well. Why should we try and escape from the ending of it? Oh! for God's sake, child, don't look like that!"

She had sprung up and was glancing down at the white shimmering folds of her gown in absolute horror.

"It is the dress," she muttered. "It is not me—it is

not you, Ned—oh Ned, it can't be you—it is the dress—I will go home—I must go home——''

'' Aura! '' he cried, but she eluded him and was out in the wide lit corridor ere he could even ask her to be calm —to forgive him—to forget. He glanced after her for a moment; then with a curse at himself closed the door and sat down moodily before the fire. What was the good?

Between the palms, the roses, the endless flowers and curtains of the corridor were many a cosy corner, many a prepared nook where men and women in the intervals between the dances sought seclusion and love-making, more or less casual according to the taste of the makers— and where passion, doubtless, had gone further than Ned's brief outburst.

'' Hullo, Aura! '' came her husband's voice as he issued from one of these corners with Miss Hirsch on his arm. ''All alone! Why, what's up? ''

The necessity for calm came to her. '' I was looking for you,'' she said. '' I want you to order the carriage for me. I'm feeling—not very well—and I shall be better at home—you see, as I don't dance.'' She looked helplessly at him wondering if she would be allowed to go.

'' I'll take you home, of course, if you want to go,'' he said gloomily—'' that is, if Miss Hirsch will excuse me.'' His regret for three more dances with the jolliest girl he had met for years was in his voice.

'' Then I won't go,'' she began, '' I couldn't spoil——''

'' You are not looking a bit well,'' said Miss Hirsch kindly. '' See! I'll take you to the ladies' room. Mr. Cruttenden, you might send her in a glass of champagne. Then you can have a quiet rest there, and go home later if you want to, but I expect you'll be all right by supper time.''

She nodded knowingly to Ted and went off with Aura, bursting over with friendliness.

But, left alone in charge of a bevy of prim maids, with the untouched champagne before her, Aura's courage

rose. She would do what she wanted to do. So, on her programme card she wrote a note to her husband using all the most consoling phrases she could think of—"Feeling a little bilious," was in itself sufficient to allay any anxiety—ended up with a cheerful—"I shall be asleep long ere you come home, please enjoy yourself," and leaving this to be given to him when he came to inquire, slipped away. The clocks were just striking half-past eleven when she paid the cabman at the gate. She had forgotten the latch-key, but, thank heaven, the servants were still up. It was New Year's Eve. Her thoughts flew back to Cwmfaernog, to the last New Year's Day when she had learnt so many things.

She was going to learn more now. She could not understand. She did not know what the world meant. She was going to see for herself once and for all.

As she thought this she was stripping off Myfanwy's creation.

"Enjoy herself!" She flung it into a corner almost with a cry, and the next minute stood in her white serge and the brown Tam-o'-Shanter. Mercifully some faint instinct of self-preservation made her muffle up the bronze beauty of her hair and hide some of the perfection of her face under a thick veil. The next instant she had carefully closed the front door again, and was hurrying away down the road towards the electric tram. They went till midnight; that would take her quickest to the heart of the great city. She had Ted's duplicate latch-key with her; she would try and be back before he returned.

Hitherto she had sought for the uttermost wisdom of nature amongst the everlasting hills—now she was going to seek the uttermost wisdom of man in his haunts.

"Hullo! Polly, my dear, ain't you comin' my side? " came a voice from the shadows over the way, but she was close to the tram lines now, and a car was coming along. It was full of holiday-makers singing, shouting, harmless enough, but over hilarious. Here there were more appeals to Polly (why perpetually Polly rather puzzled

her) as she clung to a strap, until a jovial elderly man pulled her down on his knee. Whereat the whole car roared as if it were some exquisite joke. But they meant no harm; they were only just a little convivial.

The car stopped at the Cross, the centre of the great city, and she got out. It was a fine old Cross, weather-beaten, worn, bearing on its four sides beneath the soaring quaintly floreated Symbol of Salvation, four bas-reliefs of the Passion of the Master, the Scourging, the Mocking, the Cross-carrying, the Crucifying.

Beneath the latter Aura stood looking out with clear eyes at the conduct of Christendom. The radiating streets were all thronged; the late music-halls were belching out their crowds, the supper-rooms were preparing to close by turning out their guests. But the streets were not ready for bed.

What a crowd! Gaily dressed women of almost all types. Some painted, bedizened, unmistakable, others apeing them amused, uncertain, even faintly repelled. Men with every expression on their faces, from evil passion, through vulgarity, to contemptuous tolerance. Half-grown girls more outrageous than their elders, half-grown lads jostling, leering, raiding the pavement-walkers into the very street. The electric light danced and quivered, the moistened mud of a thousand footsteps sparkled and shone.

Where in all her midnight walks upon the hills had she seen a sight like to this?

As she stood, more than one offer of a drink fell on her ears; but she took no notice.

"If you ain't goin'," said a policeman familiarly, "you must move on. I can't 'ave you standin' doing nothin'."

So she quitted the shadow of the Crucifixion; but at the corner of the street also, it was still "move on," when she herself had failed to move on; so the next time the offer of a drink came she accepted it.

"Bully for you, my girl; come along," said the offerer, and they went across to a gin shop, the doors of which had

never once been still; the flashing of their backwards and forward swing beating out the seconds with the regularity of a clock.

How bright it was! How full these last few minutes before twelve.

The offerer appraised his guest critically, "Sherry!" he ordered, "and the usual—now! my girl, drink it up sharp. The night's young for pleasure yet, but we shall have to turn out and find some other place."

Aura looked at him clearly; at the face, not bad in itself, but overlaid with sensuality.

"I am not going to drink," she said coldly. "I only came in to see—and I have seen."

She turned to go. Luckily for her, his torrent of obscene abuse was interrupted by a general exodus; for suddenly the Town Hall clock boomed, the church bells rang out, the old year passed, the new year began; began with shouts and curses and kisses and laughter. Some one struck up "Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot," and a band of perfect strangers to each other, hand-clasped and feeling wildly at each end for further friendship, lurched across the street.

A Salvation lass, her face vivid with intent, clutched at Aura's arm. "Don't go with him, my girl—don't—he is the Devil—he is Sin incarnate—he is——"

"I am not going," answered Aura in a queer strained voice. "I am in school. I am learning. I want to see for myself."

"That was Eve's sin—you are lost—come—come with me."

The crowd jostled them apart, jostled Aura into the shadow of a narrow archway. More than one man's face looked into the shadow, spoke, then passed on with a jibe. The streets were beginning to empty; the crowd was dissolving into couples; men and women were hurrying away into the side streets. She must be going also.

"Hullo! you young devil! I have got you again, have I?" came a hoarse voice, and a hand clutched at her arm.

She wrenched it away, and looked for escape. Beside

the low archway rose a flight of steps, above the steps a wider archway. A small door in it stood open. Scarcely thinking what she did, she sprang towards it, set aside a leathern curtain, and for the first time in her life found herself in a church. At least the man would not follow her here.

What a quaint little place! It was almost dark, but lights were burning, small twinkling lights set in the form of a star at the further end, and she went forward curiously. The chapel, for it was no more than that, was not quite empty. Here and there among the shadowy chairs some figure—generally two figures together—showed dimly.

It must be a Roman Catholic chapel, for that gracious woman's figure crowned with stars uplifted above the sanctuary doors with a child in her arms, must be the Blessed Mother.

Aura's heart leapt up to her. That she understood.

And what was this at her gracious feet, beneath the five-pointed star of light?

That was the mother again kneeling in adoration before her new-born child, while the ox and the ass worshipped with wide, soft eyes, and the shepherds and the wise men thronged the door.

Aura knelt down before the *crêche*, her eyes wide, soft as those of the beasts that perish. Here was peace. Here was perfection! No! not perfection, but the road to it. This was the solution of the horrors of human life outside, but beyond human life lay the life that was not human, the something better of her dreams.

A touch on her shoulder roused her. One of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, engaged in this rescue work, was beside her.

"Courage!" she said. "Courage! my sister! Our Blessed Lady will help you. Give up your sinful life."

Aura rose and looked at her simply. "I am not a bad woman," she said. "I—I don't think I ever could have been one. Now I know I couldn't." Then she flushed up. "I—I should like to give something," she continued,

and thrusting her purse into the sister's hand, she turned and passed rapidly into the street again.

She had seen enough; she had learnt enough. Now to get home.

She would have taken one of the cabs, of which two or three still stood by the Cross, but she had no money. There were two pennies, it is true, in the pocket of her jacket, but the trams had ceased running for the night. There was nothing for it but to walk, and she had no idea of the way. Her two first experiences of asking it, one entailing immediate flight from insult, were not encouraging. So the clocks were chiming half-past three ere, utterly worn out, draggled beyond belief, she stood in the hall of her own house again, thankful to find from the darkness that Ted had not yet returned. He might be back any moment, however, so she must make haste and remove her garments. She flung them all soiled and stained with the grime of the city, on the top of Myfanwy Jones' creation, the beginning and the end together.

Then, as she stood in her white dressing-gown, she paused to listen. Was that a sound in Ted's study? Could he have come in already? come in without seeing how she was?

She went downstars. There was a light beneath the door; she opened it.

The room seemed to her to be full of smoke, making all things in it unreal, almost fantastic. And was that her husband looming large, jovial, content through this new atmosphere? She shrank back from it.

"Hullo, little woman! Aura! I've such news for you. I've turned up trumps with a vengeance. I'm a hundred thousand pounds richer than I was yesterday. I found the telegram when I came home half an hour ago, and I've been dreaming ever since. Such dreams! You shall have the best time a woman ever had—frocks, jewels, everything—and by and by——"

"There may be no by and by," she said quickly. "Ted—oh Ted! be good to me."

CHAPTER XXVII

"It is May," said Ned Blackborough in rather a strained voice, "and you promised to come to Cwmfaernog in May. You look as if you needed a holiday. Come!"

Yes, it was May. Four whole months had passed since Myfanwy Jones' dress had upset Aura's cosmogony, and she had fled to find some foothold in the slums of the city. She had found a faith there, and had spent four months in trying to put that faith into practice.

It had been up-hill work, but her courage had not wavered.

Her eyes were clear as she looked back at Ned, who had come in to find her, as she so often was nowadays, alone. For Ted's first great success had been but a preliminary to months of daily excitement spent in gaining, losing, gaining again, in the midst of which he seemed to have lost sight of the future altogether. And for the present he was too busy to care. Then underlying all things was his consciousness of youth. The outlook before him was long; he could not but see that chance might come into it. Why! in five years time he would be just reaching the age at which it was prudent for a business man to marry; for, of course, his marriage to poor dear Aura had been grossly imprudent, though, but for this one disappointment,—which naturally meant more to her than to him—it had turned out very well. If only she would have condescended to amuse herself like other girls —like Rosa Hirsch, for instance—they might have had a jolly time together in the various European capitals whither his business took him. But what was the use of taking her when the only places in which Aura was not shy and ill at ease were musty fusty old picture galleries

and dreary botanical gardens. And "the Zoo," of course; she had always been at home in "the Zoo"; but then there was that beastly smell of smaller mammals all over the shop. So he had gone his way, kindly, quite affectionately, wholly without sympathy. To Aura it was rather a relief; it gave her time to rearrange her world.

She was looking a little weary over a pile of household accounts. There was no need nowadays for heartburnings as to expense; but none the less Ted expected a properly-balanced book, and the items were terribly numerous. It was the herring-and-a-half problem expressed in pounds instead of pence, and there was quite a wrinkle of thought between Aura's eyebrows, for she was no arithmetician.

To Ned that wrinkle was a tragedy; but then it is always a tragedy for a man to watch from a distance the woman he loves trying to reconstruct her life, and reconcile herself to the lack of what he knows he could give her; and the greater her success the greater—in a way—is the tragedy.

Ned had felt this every instant of those four months during which the memory of that pitiful protest, "Not you Ned. Ah! Ned, not you!" had come between him and even apology. When he had gone back that evening to fling himself into a chair and gloom over the fire for a few minutes, he had told himself he was a fool. He had told himself so hundreds of times since that evening, until there had grown up in him the conviction that this sort of thing could not possibly last for ever. Why should it? Why should three human beings be sacrificed? And in heaven's name to what? Not to a marriage of either soul or body. They all needed something which they had not got. Ted needed, or would need, a wife and children. These might be his if Aura were taken away. She needed the old, free, natural life. This Ned could give her in that island on the southern seas. And how much more? Ye gods! how much more of love—true love, and tenderness and truth! As for his own needs, they were simple, being summed up in that one word—

Aura. He needed her every instant of the day and night. He could not be content without her. Love had left his body; it had invaded his mind; it had not yet touched his soul. The personal element was still too strong for him, so by degrees he had brought himself to believe that perhaps the best way out of the *impasse* for all the three actors in the tragedy would be for him to beguile her away—if he could.

"You know you promised me last year," he reiterated.

"Yes! I promised," she said sadly, and he knew where her thoughts had fled. He used to see her so often in his dreams, wandering through great drifts of purple iris, the flower which brings the messages of the gods, leading a little child by the hand. She was there now, and a sudden dread came over him again lest nothing short of that would ever make her really happy. But the next moment he had roused himself. "I should love to go, of course," she went on. "Fancy seeing Cwmfaernog and the floor of heaven! Only I can't, can I? till Ted returns, and that may be——"

"Never, perhaps!" interrupted Ned sarcastically. "He hasn't been much at home lately, has he?"

She flushed up hastily. "Why should he be? he is not like you—you are an idle man; besides——" she paused, her pride refusing to justify her husband even to Ned. "It may not be for a fortnight," she went on coldly; "he never can tell. And by that time the hyacinths will be over, and it would be no good. So—so it is no use thinking of it."

But her very readiness in the self-defence of this refusal to blame her husband, decided him. If that went on much longer, the tragedy would become permanent. A sudden weariness of the whole foolish muddle seized on him. He was not going to have Aura spend her days in saintliness and martyrdom, growing more and more dignified and gracious, more and more motherly in the look of brimming affection she never failed to give to him—to him her lover!

It was beyond bearing. He would break down the

prison walls at all costs. He was tired to death himself of civilisation; they would go into the wilderness and be happy.

"I will ask Mrs. Ramsay to come with us," he said, knowing that he had not the slightest intention of so doing; but if he was to take the law into his own hands, he would require a few days to mature his plans.

"She can't come," he said two days afterwards; "she isn't quite up to it."

Aura looked for a moment as if she were back in the iris fields. "I'm sorry," she began.

"But," went on Ned coolly, "I believe I could take you there and back by the four-cylinder Panhard in a day—if you don't mind starting rather early. Do come. I—I want a holiday too—badly."

He looked like it.

"Poor Ned," she said softly, for she had begun to realise her responsibilities towards him also. That was the worst of life; the great hidden tie between all creatures could so seldom be felt or seen until some wound stripped the quivering flesh, and left the ligaments bare. "Yes! I will come," she said after a pause, making up her mind that there, standing on the floor of heaven, she would try and make him understand that she was worth no man's passionate love. "When shall we go?"

Something seemed to rise in his throat and choke him. "The first fine day. Shall we say to-morrow? But we must start at five; and breakfast by the way."

"At five!" she echoed joyously, looking more like herself than she had done for months. "Oh Ned! how jolly! I haven't been up at five for ages and ages. It disturbs Ted so—and then," she hurried on—"the servants loathe it. They hate you to know how late they are."

She was ready waiting for him, with quite a colour in her cheeks when he drove up. It was a delicious morning, cool, clear, full of shafted lights and shadows from the rising sun. Aura tilted back her head triumphantly and

gazed up at the little white fleecy clouds that were drifting steadily overhead before the westerly breeze.

"I'm not going to look at anything grimy to-day," she said with a laugh; "and even Blackborough can't soil those! They are too gladly far away. Do you know that often when I've nothing else to comfort me, I lie on my back in the garden and dream they are just feathers out of a great, soft pillow where I am finding rest!"

He felt a pang for her innocent self-betrayal, but he retorted gravely, "That is your fault for not being contented with a good civilised wire-mattress."

She laughed out loud. "How nice of you to talk nonsense! It is exactly like old times; exactly!" she cried. "Ned! do you think we were made to forget? I don't."

"Some things," he said soberly, "are best forgotten."

"Not many," she replied cheerfully. "Sometimes, Ned, I seem to get at the meaning of so much by remembering, and then I see how all these little lives of ours work into one big whole; and then—and then." She was silent, her eyes still upon the clouds.

"If her Majesty will deign to look upon this poor world," said Ned Blackborough after quite a long while, "she will see primroses."

They were beyond the grime. The skies were blue, the trees, the grass were green, and far away the distant hills showed purple through the blossoming apple orchards.

What need was there for more?

Not once, not twice, but many times that day, as the car sped almost noiselessly through lanes and past homesteads and fields where the lambs lay white like little clouds dropped from heaven, Ned told himself joyfully that this was but the beginning of an end which would never come.

"Why are you putting on your goggles?" she asked, as, by the low road round the coast—for the straight hilly pitch over the head of the valley was too bad for the motor—they came within measurable distance of Dinas.

"There are a lot of slate spiculæ on the road," he

replied coolly, "and one got into my eye once. You had better put on a veil too. I brought one on purpose."

"You think of everything, Ned," she replied gaily. "I never knew any one like you."

Except Guy Fawkes, or some arch traitor of that sort, he felt with a pang; but one had to take precautions, and if you set yourself up as a *Deus ex machina* to get people out of a muddle—why, some mud was likely to stick.

So, disguised out of all recognition, they swept through the village of Dinas, and, passing the staring schoolhouse, took the turn towards Cwmfaernog.

The villagers looked after them with slack curiosity, for Dinas was, as it had always been, immersed in its own trivialities. The revival had passed away, leaving its traces physical and mental no doubt, but ceasing to bring any new interest into life. At the present moment, however, the village had an absorbing interest of its own; for in two days time the Reverend Hwfa Williams was to marry Alicia Edwards, and all the other young women in the place were in that curious state of mingled spitefulness and vicarious nervous excitability which a wedding so often provokes in the feminine sex.

"They will not find any one at Cwmfaernog, whatever," said Isaac Edwards at his door, "for Martha Bate and her husband went for a jaunt the day before yesterday. It is only old Evans from the shepherd's hut that is to milk the cows and feed the cocks."

Meanwhile the motor sped on, curving round the rocks.

"There is no more slate here, anyhow," cried Aura joyfully, tearing off her veil. "Oh Ned! look, look! The floor of heaven? Ah! do stop and let us look."

He did not answer. The engine slowed, quivered, sunk to silence. Now, at last, he understood. Now he knew what he had seen in the boat so long ago, when the swift southern storm was sweeping up unseen behind him. This was the blue mist which had enveloped him and held him. A blue mist hiding the earth, hiding even every green thing from sight as it lay in wreaths in the hol-

lows or crept up and up and up, leaving itself in clouds to cover all things until it met the sky.

The floor of heaven indeed!

Not quite so blue perhaps as that distant roof of heaven over which the heat of the day had spread a faintly violet haze; but still—the floor of heaven!

No other words expressed it. Here, surely the angels of God might tread with unsoiled feet.

"Does not everything of earth seem to fall away," came Aura's voice all hushed and quiet, "and leave one . . . free at last!"

She was out of the car standing, her sandalled feet just touching the carpet of hyacinths, her hands stretched out towards them, her face full of absolute undimmed joy. "See!" she continued, "the dear things grow on to our very path—we won't hurt them, will we? Let us walk on to the house and see Martha, then I will take you through a path in the woods to the best place of all." She paused and looked at him curiously. "Ned—what is it? Something is wrong! What is it?"

"There is nothing wrong," he answered quietly, "and I may as well tell you here as elsewhere. Martha is not at the house."

She paled a very little. "She is not there," she echoed; "why?"

"Because I sent her away."

"You sent her away?"

"Yes! because I wanted to be alone with you—and—we are alone—alone with nothing but our love between us—for you do love me? Aura!" he cried, his quiet giving way as he seized her hands and drew her towards him. "Why should we go back to all the grime—to the dull, useless, foolish life? Come with me! No one wants us, no one will miss us, not even Ted! It has all been a mistake from the beginning. There is but one way to set things straight—to leave him free to do as he chooses—come——"

"My poor Ned!"

She stood unresisting before him, with all the mother-

hood that was in her, looking at him through eyes that brimmed over with tears, and her voice, full of an overwhelming pity, smote on his ears, a knell to all his hopes. He knew it, he felt it to be so even as he listened. He let her hands fall with a sense of impotence to hold her.

"It is my fault, dear," she said softly, "I ought to have told you—I ought to have made you understand. Ned! I am worth no man's love. I shall never——"

He interrupted her with an angry impatient laugh. "But I do understand. It is you who cannot understand that love lives untrammelled by such trivialities. Aura! were I your husband now, you would be a thousand times more dear—the tie between us would be a thousand times more strong——"

"Hush!" she said, with a world of mysterious solemnity in her voice. "If that is true, Ned; if love really can live untrammelled by the body, why should it not live untrammelled by the mind? You want to see me, to hear me, to—to touch me—perhaps! But——Ned! There is something that is beyond all this—that is beyond everything—beyond you and me, and yet it is you and I—that is ours now——" Suddenly her tone rose swift and sharp—"Come, Ned! let us forget the rest——is *this* not enough?"

He looked around him and, even amid such transcendental beauty as was there, shook his head. "I cannot live on air, Aura," he said bitterly. "No man can."

Her face melted into gentle smiles. "There is the lunch-basket," she said.

He turned aside almost with a curse. "It is easy to laugh," he began.

"Is it so easy?" she asked, and once again her voice brought to him that sense of infinite pity, infinite denial. "Then let us laugh, Ned, while we can. Come, let us lose ourselves. Oh Ned! give me one day unspotted by the world, untouched by trivialities, just this one day!"

And as she took his hand, the glamour, not of this world, but of that which lies hidden beyond it, above it, claimed possession of his soul. The blue mist closed in on

them. They stood on the floor of heaven with the sky above them.

. . . . . .

Down in the hollows with the silken fans of the half-opened beech-leaves overhead, a saffron-coloured azalea dropping its gold upon the blue, the pink campion struggling for a place amongst the blossoms, a tuft of white poet's-narcissus looking up from the pool of water into which a scarce-seen runlet dripped and dropped. What colour! What almost unimaginable beauty.

. . . . . .

Out in the open, in a cup in the hills where the carpet of heaven-blue hyacinths dwarfed into closer growth showed like a shadowy cloud against the clearer blue of the sky. What dreamfulness! What peace!

. . . . . .

Away on the springing heather on the mountain-top, with half Wales spread before you, and the westering sun obscured by just such a shadowy cloud, sending a great sloping corona of light rays to nestle in the dimples of the hills, and shine in shafted reflections on the distant sea.

What visions of unending space, of ceaseless life!

. . . . . .

"Is it not time?" she said at last as they sat in the sheep-shelter.

The sun was beginning to sink in the west calmly, serenely. The light shone round them, purest gold. Down in the valley, the blue hyacinth mist grew darker, colder.

"Yes! It is time," he said quietly.

"It has been quite perfect," she said again.

"Almost perfect," he assented; after all he was but human, and humanity does not live by sight alone. It craves to touch also.

The motor was awaiting them where they had left it.

She laid her hand on his for a second ere he started it.

"Say it has been quite perfect, Ned," she pleaded.

He looked at her and smiled. "I will not say it—you can say it for me."

She was silent for a moment and then she spoke.

"It has been quite perfect!"

The motor sped on, the mist wreaths of the hyacinths grew dulled by young green sprouting ferns, and the rocks closed in for the swift turn by the school. The children were already out, and a group of them were playing on the road. They scattered, leaving it clear. And then, suddenly, from the shadow of the parapet-wall a little toddling child, escaping from the hand of its wide-eyed curiosity-struck elder, lurched out into the open.

"Oh Ned! Take care—the child—the child!"

Aura stood up, and in Ned's sudden swerve inwards, an overhanging root from the high rocky bank above struck her full upon the temple.

The child, shrieking more from joyous excitement than fear, lurched back with outstretched arms to the shadow; but Aura sank back, her head resting on Ned's shoulder.

"My God! Aura!" he cried. There was no answer. He did not stop the car, but sweeping it round the open space by the school, raced back to Cwmfaernog. There, he knew, all was ready for her reception, there everything would be to hand. As he sped through the misty blue cloud once more, he saw nothing of it. His eyes were on her whitening face.

Dear God! How limp she felt, as he lifted her in his arms and carried her across the drawbridge, and so through the garden to the house. A scent of violets and primroses, of lilies of the valley, of all things sweet assailed him as he entered the door that was only latched. He had brought the flowers when he had come down secretly to see that all things were prepared. He had brought them *for her*! And the table set out with flowers and fruit—that was *for her* also.

He stumbled up the stairs with his heavy burden to her room. He had not entered that. He had only climbed once more to her window-sill to set it abloom with white

and purple iris—the messengers of the gods. How they mocked him now with their tale of immortality. His mind went back to many a Kashmir grave which he had seen, long and narrow like the sill set as thick with irises, high upon the hills, low amongst the dales.

But she could not be dead!

Yet her head lay on the pillow just as it had touched it, her arm slipping from his support sank, till it could sink no more.

"Aura!" he muttered faintly, "Aura!"

He knelt and laid his ear to her heart—oh! sweetest resting-place in all the world!

There was no sound, no beat. Yes! she was dead!

He turned his face round into the soft pillow of her breast and whispered "Aura." It seemed to him as on that midsummer night when he had first met her, as if all the world were wailing "Aura! Aura!"

How long he knelt there he scarcely knew; a faint sense of sound in the house roused him to the remembrance that something must be done.

He must call for help. But if he did that, every one must know that she was here with him alone. The world would judge, and what would that judgment reck of her spotlessness or his forbearance? No! that must not be, if he could compass otherwise.

His mind, almost unhinged by the terrible shock, chased possibility through a thousand impossibilities, the least grotesque of these being a grave of his own digging amongst the hyacinths; his subsequent flight being easy, since he had made all arrangements for a sudden disappearance.

Was that a noise below—a faint creak on the stairs? The possibility troubled him. He crossed to the door, and opened it to find himself confronted by Ted Cruttenden, his face distorted by passion.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "You—you infernal scoundrel—where is Aura—my wife?"

His very vehemence, his very lack of self restraint, brought back Ned Blackborough's wandering wits. He

closed the door behind him, and stood with his back to it.

"She is—not there," he said slowly. "Ted! listen for one moment. I brought her here——"

"Do you think I don't know that, you damned villain," burst out Ted—"when I came home this morning and found you had taken her—there was some cock-and-bull story the servants had about not sitting up for her, and a latch-key and all that rot—do you think I was fool enough not to understand—I've never really trusted you. And now—and now—let me pass in, I say, or there'll be murder done."

"Listen one moment——" the voice was inexorable. "You never trusted me. I know that. Have you not trusted her? Are you fool enough to have lived day and night with her, to have lain with your head upon her breast—and not known—No! it is impossible. You know what she is—you must—you do know it——"

Even to Ted Cruttenden's mad jealousy, memory could bring no fuel to feed the flame; his very anger sank for the moment to self-pity.

"I come home," he muttered, "I find her gone. I follow. I have walked over the hill to——"

"To—spy upon us——" interrupted Ned sternly, "go on."

"To spy upon you if you will," cried Ted, his passion rising again—"and I find you here, in her room——"

Ned opened the door behind him quietly. "Because she is dead," he said, and leaning against the lintel, his head upon his arm, waited.

"Dead!"

The whisper reached him from within full almost of fear; and there was a long empty silence.

"You will not say I killed her, I suppose," said Ned bitterly at last. "It was an accident. We were going back—back to you——" The very wonder of that fact stayed speech; but he knew he must go on. "I am quite ready to let you shoot me, by and by, but at present—I—I want you to think of her—of yourself. I don't count. I

need count any more. But we must be quick about it. As I stand before—before Something that is mightier than I, I swear to you that I have done you no harm. We won't go into the other question as to what harm you have done me. And for her—you know. But—but even if we had, what use is there now, in making a fuss in letting the world know that you have found her there—with me. Not a soul knows I am here. You can take my place, as you have taken it before. I can go, as I have gone before."

From within, where Ted Cruttenden stood beside the bed, vaguely remorseful at his own lack of anything save anger, horror, regret, no answer came.

"Ted," went on Lord Blackborough, "you must decide. I can go the way you came, and you can call for help. It must be done at once. I'll tell you how it happened so that you may know. We got here about noon. We didn't go into the house. We were—we were in the woods and on the hills——" his voice failed a little, then grew monotonous. "She said it was time to go, and I—I was a fool! I said so too. Just at the corner by the school, a child, a little child, ran in front of the car. She—she called out—and rose. There was a root—oh! Curse the damned thing—it struck her as I swerved. It has left a little blue mark—you can see it on her temple if you look. She never spoke. I brought her back. She was dead."

"You say you didn't kill her," burst out Ted, his voice now full of crude anger, grief, hate, "but you did. You brought her here."

"Is there any use in recriminations," asked Ned wearily, "you have to decide. And, after all, she—she was no wife for you—you are young yet——" Ted listening, cursed him for repeating the inward thought that had forced itself into his mind. "You have all the world before you—and——" for an instant the voice hesitated as if ashamed, uncertain, then went on. "I had made out a deed of gift to you of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. It is about all I have left, and the works and all

that must go to the heir, you know. You see I meant to disappear, and I meant to take your wife,—so this was just payment. It can be just payment still. I shall not trouble you again. But—but you must decide at once.''

He stood waiting for a moment or two, his head resting as before upon his upraised arm upon the lintel; then he heard a step, and lifted his eyes to check what he knew all too well would come from Ted's lips. Did he not know it? Was it not the answer of the world where everything even honour had its price? And was it not far better, far wiser? Was it not what he himself desired?

'' You will find the motor by the bridge,'' he said quietly. '' You had better call some one from the village first, and then the doctor. The children will give evidence, some of them were quite big, and no one at New Park knows anything. Good-bye? I shan't see you again.''

When Ted had gone, he closed the door, went downstairs, gathered up the tell-tale flowers and fruits which he had brought, climbed to the window-sill and removed the iris, so, putting them all into a basket, went back to the woods.

Before the car returned with its first consignment of help, the misty-blue wreaths of the hyacinths, darkening with the dusk, had hidden him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

He roused himself, for the night was passing. The last twinkling lights—the lights which he had been almost—unconsciously watching in the valley below him—had gone.

But one steady star remained. That came from the room where she lay dead. It seemed incredible. Such sudden endings to all things came into life sometimes, of course; still why should they come into his? It was unfair. He risked everything on this one stake. Bit by bit he had given up everything else. He had chased love to the outside edge of the world, and now—it had gone over the verge.

He stood up and stretched himself, wondering vaguely how he had passed the last few hours. He had slept for a while, he knew. That was at the beginning, after he had gone down to the hollow where they had sat together, and where he had planted the iris by the side of the narcissus which was too proud to look for its fellow in the earth-bounded pool at its feet. It had amused him—yes! positively amused him—to dig holes for the bulbs with his pen-knife, and make a grave—long and narrow like the window-sill—just such a grave as he remembered on hill and dale at Kashmir. And it was not an empty grave either; for he had buried in it the violets and the primroses, the lilies of the valley and all things sweet.

In that first hour he must have been almost crazy with grief.

But then, he remembered, he had lain down half-hidden by the hyacinths, dog-tired in mind and body to sleep a dreamless sleep. Then he had come and watched the lights until it should be dark enough for the night to bring disguise.

Now it had come, and it was time to be going.

Whither?

As if that mattered! He had come prepared for a secret journey, and there was a hundred pounds odd in his pocket. The thought made him smile bitterly. So far as outward circumstances stood, he was in exactly the same position as he had been two years ago when he and Ted had first met in a bicycle smash. In exactly the same position since what was there to prevent his turning up at New Park in a few days, and resuming his life as Lord Blackborough? There was nothing to prevent it since the deed of gift could stand, of course; nothing but his utter weariness. It would be better to start afresh.

He looked at his watch. Yes! it was time he was off. He would walk down the coast road to Pot-âfon; thence take the cargo steamer to Liverpool. All roads meet there. He would go off to the wilds somewhere, and after a year if—if nothing changed—he could easily fabricate his own death, and let the heir come into what he did not want.

He set off for his night walk cheerfully enough. The glamour of that past day was upon him still, he seemed to hear her voice saying for him "It has been quite perfect." In reality those had been her last words, since the cry "the child! the child!" had been wrung from her by chance—by one of the unhappy chances and changes of this most unhappy world.

"It has been quite perfect." Ay! perhaps, but in the past tense. What of the present?

He paused at the bridge below the village where the mountain stream joined the river Afon, to look down to the still pool below the arch.

In the moonlight it looked very quiet. One might sleep there without dreams if people would only leave one alone, but they would not. He leant over the parapet and smiled at the oddness of one hive of swarming atoms, objecting to another hive of atoms choosing the hollow of a pool wherein to rest, interfering to fish it up and put it somewhere else in order to disintegrate into atoms again.

And after the atoms? There lay the question. The atom and the human consciousness? Were not both an equal mystery born of the unity beyond?

As he stood there absorbed in thought the sound of rapid footsteps echoed down the steep road from Dinas and, not wishing to be seen, he stepped back at once into the shadow of a tree that overhung the bridge. Looking up the roadway he saw a woman's figure. She was running swiftly with a curious unevenness, a curious uncertainty, yet evidently with some set purpose. As she passed him he caught a glimpse of her face, and—mere hive of atoms though he was—he started after her in a second.

None too soon either! He had just had hold of her in time, as she wavered for an instant on the parapet.

"You young fool!" he said roughly. "What's the matter? What are you doing that for?"

The girl—she did not look more than twenty—stared at him vacantly as if she did not understand what he meant, then with a little cry of horror apparently at herself, covered her face with her hands, and crouched down beneath his touch in a perfect storm of sobs.

"Don't cry!" he said more kindly, "What is it all about? What were you going to do?"

"I—I don't know," she wept. "It—it came upon me suddenly that it was the only way—it swept me off my feet—oh! wicked, wicked girl that I am—if—if it hadn't been for you—Oh! what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"What's wrong?" he asked, impatient at her helpless emotion. "Anything I can help? Come! it's no use crying. Of course you're a wicked girl, but as you evidently don't really want to kill yourself you'll have to live. So you had better make a clean breast of it. I daresay I can help—if it isn't——" Her face looked innocent and pure, still one never could tell. "Come—out with it"—he went on—"If it's anything about money——"

She caught at the word. "Money! Oh! if I could only get the money," she wailed.

"Come!" he said with a smile, "if it is only money——"

So by degrees she told him her name was Alicia Edwards. She was the happiest, luckiest girl in the world, who was to be married in two days to the man she loved—to a saint upon earth. And she bore an unblemished character. And her father was also a saint upon earth. But that very evening by the post had come—not a bolt from the blue—for she had had an awful prescience that it would come, though who would have thought that Myfanwy would be so cruel, and she just married to the man she loved! Oh! it was wicked! A bill, and such a bill too! A hundred and three pounds; and if it was not paid for at once it would be sent. Oh! she would go mad with shame.

"What was it for?" asked Ned, wearily good-natured.

"That is it," wailed poor Alicia, "it is for hats and dresses. And I ought to have paid. And what am I, a minister's wife, to ask him to pay such bills. And my father will not. What am I to do? If I was a bad girl it would be nothing; but I am good, so very good! I cannot face them saying I am bad."

"They would have said you were mad, I suppose, if you had jumped from the bridge just now," said Ned grimly.

Alicia looked at him furtively and wept again.

What a world it was, thought Ned bitterly. Here was a well-educated, deeply-religious girl occupied entirely in thinking what her neighbours would say of her; those neighbours who, in a way, were as responsible as she. For was not humanity, as a whole, responsible for all the deeds of humanity. Was he not, in a way, responsible for his own birth, being as he was, but the outcome of his forefathers? Virtue and vice, honour and dishonour, were they not all hidden in that first Step of dancing Prakrit? So there came to him for once a great humility, a patient acceptance of all the evil in the world as being part of himself.

"I will give you the money, child," he said; "you

shall marry the saint and be a saint yourself—why not?"

"I can't—I can't take it," she muttered, for all that holding fast to the purse he gave her; "I can't take it from a stranger."

"A stranger?" he echoed. "Bah! In the beginning, little girl, you and I were one. Remember that in all your little life. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end—Amen!"

He stooped and kissed her as he left her at her father's door, and she stood looking after him, wondering if he were indeed a man or a vision. But the money was there. A hundred pounds in notes and three sovereigns. She would send them by the morning's post to Myfanwy Pugh, and then——

Alicia Edwards fell on her knees beside her bed and thanked God for the money.

Meanwhile Ned Blackborough had paused to re-make his plans in his new condition of pennilessness; for he had but a few shillings left for the immediate present. Afterwards there was money and to spare awaiting him at various points on the route which he had carefully prepared for flight. Still he must first get to a point.

Then the remembrance of the hundred pounds he had hidden away in the cleft of the rock up on the hills came to him, making him laugh; because there was no question now as to who needed it. He came back to it a beggar; beggared, indeed, of all save life. Yet life was all. The words of the Indian sage came back to him: —

> "Indestructible the life is, spreading life thro' all.
> I say to Thee weapons reach not the life.
> Flame burns it not, waters cannot overwhelm
> Nor dry winds wither it. Impenetrable,
> Unentered, unassailed, unharmed, untouched,
> Immortal, all arriving, stable, sure,
> Thus is the Life declared."

Vaguely he felt comforted. The sense of Unity lay around him in the air. He saw the Golden Gateway. He

knew that its Door was open. But his love kept him from entering. He could yield himself without one sigh to the Beginning that was the End, but he could not yield her, for he had not yet realised that she also was the Beginning, the End.

The dawn was just breaking as he reached the gap, and searching in the cleft found nothing.

Was he glad, or was he sorry? He was not sure. In a way he felt more free, since he need now have no plans for the future. He could sit down and watch the sun rise. After that he could walk over Llwydd-y-Bryd to the coastline by the country town, and so — anywhere!

This was sufficient, surely, for the moment.

The sun rose in a panoply of purple and red with, low down above the hills, a band or two of torquoise blue to hint of the vast fields of calm ether beyond the storm clouds of the world.

"Aura! Aura! Aura!"

Even there, to the far, unending depths, the cry echoed. A cry apart, poignant with individual anguish.

He started up and moved on. The staghorn moss trailed clinging to the soil beneath his feet, a hawk hovering in the air was held to its place also by the same force which sent the world on which he stood, spinning on its way. But still that love, that grief of his, would not be made one with Nature.

"Aura! Aura! Aura!"

He stood on the summit of Llydd-y-Bryd once more. Even the "gingerbeer" had gone from the shieling now; but it would not be long before humanity returned once more with placard and paste-pot to appropriate the spot to base uses.

Down in the blue hollow yonder lay Cwmfaernog, and in Cwmfaernog lay—no! not Aura! Aura was of the woods and hills. He could feel her in them separate, distinct from himself. He would not give her up; he could not. He would give one more look at the peaceful little valley from the crag yonder, and then take her with him;

something he would not yield, not even to the Force which held the round world sure.

The round world perhaps—but—ye Gods!

His foot slipped, he caught at a root to save himself, it gave way—he fell.

The hot noon-tide sun was beating down on him when he woke to consciousness again. He tried to move, and could not. After a time his mind returned clearly; he pinched himself upon the thigh and felt nothing. That, then, was the reason why he felt no pain, for one of his legs was evidently broken. He had injured his spine, and it was paralysed below the waist. This, then, was the end.

"Aura! Aura!"

His heart leapt up in him. It could not be long now.

He was lying in the corrie into which he and Ted had vainly tried to get that first night of the storm, and as he lay he could watch the sun tilt from its high glory in the heavens, to touch the world in the west then disappear. It would be a beautiful sunset. How many more would he see, he wondered. How long would it last? Some days perhaps.

How idle all things—money, happiness, even love itself seemed beside this certainty of leaving them all. The only thing that money had brought to him was the death of a wild animal—thank God!—alone! Except for Aura.

Aura! Aura! Aura!

Yes! she had been right. Love like his needed nothing. It could exist—navy! grow to greater strength without trivialities. They were beyond the Shadow of the Night now; nothing could touch them again. They would go on and on. . . .

That night he slept a little under the stars, and in his dreams he saw her walking amid the drifts of iris leading a little child by the hand. Her face was sad, and as he tried to comfort her, his eyes opened; and lo! it was dawn once more.

A primrose dawn, with little faint, far grey clouds just flecking the wide waste of gold.

"It was quite perfect."

Her words came back to him. She was wrong. The part could not be perfect, and what were they, their griefs, their joys, their loves, but part of the great whole.

His mind was beginning to wander a little, and in the high noon tide he slept to dream that he saw the little child alone. Her head was crowned with iris flowers, her feet were among them, her eyes were violet and white as they were. They looked into his. "Mother says you have no right," came her childish voice. "I am the immortality of the race. Die and forget her. Die and forget all things."

When he awoke, a raven, perched on a rock hard by, cawed hoarsely, and flapped lazily away to watch from a greater distance.

A few drops of water trickled from the rock close beside him. He had hollowed out a little cup for it with his hand and drank of it from time to time. Now he poured some of it on his head which had begun to ache. What use was there in prolonging the agony? The sooner it was over the better. He searched in his pockets for any scrap of paper which might betray him, and, tearing them up, dug them toilfully into the ground, almost amusing himself in restoring the spot to perfect homogeneity with its surroundings.

His gold signet ring he flung away into the little pool, which, collecting the surface drainage of the very summit, brimmed up below the rock to overflow in a tiny stream. He tried to make a duck and drake of it as his last contribution to the sovereign remedy, but he failed, and he smiled at his failure.

He was becoming very much detached, even from himself, and the one thing to which he clung was the memory of his love.

Aura! Aura! Aura!

He must find her somewhere; and she seemed so close! Sometimes he wondered if she were not there, in his eyes, in his heart.

"Aura," he murmured to himself; "Aura!"

That night he slept dreamlessly. And when he opened his eyes, lo! there was a Sea of Light. The great shining arch of the sky seemed to him the golden gate; the open door lay behind him. He was on the other side. He had found himself and her as they had been always, not as a part but as the whole.

"*Tad ek am*," he thought, realising with a rush that He was All Things, and that All Things were in Him. So, as he lay gazing, the round sun rose gloriously, and he sank into unconsciousness.

. . . . . .

When he awoke it was to find himself in a work-house infirmary; a long, bare room set in a straight row with beds. Some hive of atoms must have found him on the mountain-top and brought him to die here. Well! it could not be for long. There was a black screen folded up, ready for use, at the foot of the bed. He knew what that meant; but nothing seemed to matter now that he had passed the open door to lose and find Himself.

"Only those who lose can find." His mind, blurred, confused, lingered over this certainty.

"He is conscious," said a voice beside him, and a face, dark, curiously eager, bent over him. It was Morris Pugh's. Walking over the hills that morning on his way to Cæron, the county town, he had come upon Ned Blackborough, had summoned help, and brought him to the infirmary. And now, although having seen him but once in his life, he had failed to recognise the light-hearted maker of ducks-and-drakes in the worn, unconscious man, so close to death, he longed with all the eagerness that was in him, that, ere he had to leave him to death, he might have the chance of saying some word for the Master. For these eighteen months of hard, practical work in the slums of London while they had sobered Morris Pugh, had left him still ardent.

"Hullo!" said Ned weakly. "I've seen you before somewhere—haven't I?" He paused, and some one gave him another spoonful of stimulant. He wondered

vaguely why he took it, since death must come; but it was as well to please people—if you could. "I remember now," he went on, as if he were recalling it from very far away. "It was when we hid the hundred pounds. You were the parson who said, 'Money was the root of all evil.'" He gave a ghost of a smile, then looked into the dark eyes curiously. "I suppose you took it?"

Morris Pugh flushed at the very memory of that never-to-be-forgotten search for God's providence on the mountain-top.

"So it was you who made the ducks and drakes—I remember," he said slowly. "No! I did not take it; but—but I looked for it, and it was gone."

"Gone," echoed Ned, and lay thinking.

"Then it must have been Ted who took it," he murmured, going back into the past. "He must have gone that midsummer night—why, yes! of course——" Then suddenly his dulled mind grasped the whole sequence of events. "He—and Hirsch—that is how he got Aura—my money—damn him!"

"Hush!" came Morris Pugh's voice sternly. "You stand too close to the judgment yourself for curses——"

"I—I will say bless him, if that suits you better," murmured Ned wearily. "And if you don't mind—I prefer to stand alone."

"No man can stand alone before the judgment seat of God," pleaded Morris Pugh earnestly. "I do not know what your life has been, but the best of us need an advocate; and there is One."

"My life?" echoed Ned dreamily. "I want to forget my life—not to talk about it—if you would go—and leave me." Then he opened his eyes again. "Did you bring me here?"

"Yes! I brought you—I found you unconscious. But there is One who will bring you safe into the fold."

"I wonder if you would—be kind enough to let me—die alone."

"Alone!" echoed Morris Pugh. "You can never be

alone. And even for this world, would you not like us to call your friends—to let them know? ''

'' I—I have my friends,'' he answered; '' I want—nothing.''

So after whispering about him regretfully, they left him for a while, and he lay staring at a ray of sunlight which slanted through the window at the further end of the ward, and fell, in a golden glory, upon an empty bed. If it had only fallen upon his!

Gold! Yes! everything was gold in this world. How people fought for it, selling their souls, their bodies for it! yet how little it meant. A hideous mockery, indeed, was this Christian greed of gold. And yet money meant much —Ted—damn him!

'' Mate,'' came a voice from the next bed, where a tramp, hollow-eyed, unshaven, who was recovering from an attack of pneumonia, had lain listening, coughing. '' Tain't no business o' mine in a way, but there ain't no good your lyin' an' damnin' a man as ain't done you no 'arm. 'Tain't in a way fair on you for me ter let you go to 'ell over a lie. It's the rumm'est start as I sh'ud be 'ere, but—ye see, Ted—'ooever 'e may be—didn't take that 'undred—I took it.''

'' You! '' he said faintly.

'' Me! '' echoed the tramp. '' It's—it's the rumm'est start; but—you see I was on the lay atwixt Blackborough an' Liverpool. Outer-work-an'-emigration lay it 'twas, an' not a bad one in the summer time, for them Welsh is generous. I was asleep in the gorse close by when you two come by an' smashed. Then you begun shieing the shiners about, an' I waited thinkin' to get some of 'em out after you'd gone. An' I did too, what with bein' able to dive. But there! The 'ole thing wasn't much worth; not more than one good drunk, an' then it was over. But don't you go a-lyin' an' damnin' the wrong fellar. It was me, not 'im; so curse me an' welcome if it do you any good.''

He rolled over on his pillow, and said no more.

Ned lay still, and smiled inwardly. His mind was

clouding fast. He felt vaguely glad that Ted had not taken the money. But, then, how could he have taken it, seeing that it had never existed? They had all thought of it, and relied on it, and gone to look for it; and there was nothing. It never had been anything but a dream.

The gold sun-ray had crept down the ward. It lay now closer to him. If he could only die in the sunlight! That was the only gold worth having.

How the atoms danced in it! unceasing, endless. He felt their vibration in himself, but beyond the dancer lay sightlessness, and touchlessness, and soundlessness.

Faint voices came to him from around his bed.

"There is time yet! Repent and be saved. Put your trust in Him! Keep your eyes fixed on Him—remember that you are bought with a price."

There was just the flicker of a faint courteous smile.

"*Caveat Emptor*," murmured the dying man, and turned his face to the sun-ray. "Aura!" he murmured. "*Tad ek am.*"

The sun-ray shifted, crept to his bed, and lay there, golden.

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